

# The Old Slavic *Digenis Akritis* and Modern Greek Oral Tradition

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# *Digenis Akritis*, the “Two-Blooded Frontiersman”

Composed in c12 Constantinople on the basis of Anatolian epic songs and romance form “Vaguely set during the times of the long-standing wars between the Empire and the Caliphate (ninth-tenth centuries), the poem tells of the story of **(1)** an Arab emir, his exploits against the Byzantines, his falling in love with the captured daughter of a Christian general, their marriage, **(2)** the subsequent birth of their son Basileios Digenis Akritis (‘Imperial, the Frontiersman of Double Descent’), **(3)** the wondrous [hunting] feats of the boy, **(4)** his elopement with a general’s beautiful daughter, their subsequent marriage, **(5)** his meeting with the emperor [...], **(6)** his exploits against the *apelátai* (‘bandits’), **(7)** his bellicose/ amorous encounter with the Amazon Maximou, **(8)** the building of his palace on the shores of the Euphrates, his sudden disease, [and] his and his wife’s deaths without any descendants.” (Agapitos, 2012)



# Byzantium in late c9/early c10





# Byzantium in c10





## Material evidence of c12 origin: sgraffito plates, c12-13





## Material evidence of c12 origin: church fresco, c13



Church of the Panagia Chrysaphitissa, Lakonia, Greece. Laura Horan, 2018



# Byzantium in c11





# Byzantium in late c11/early c12



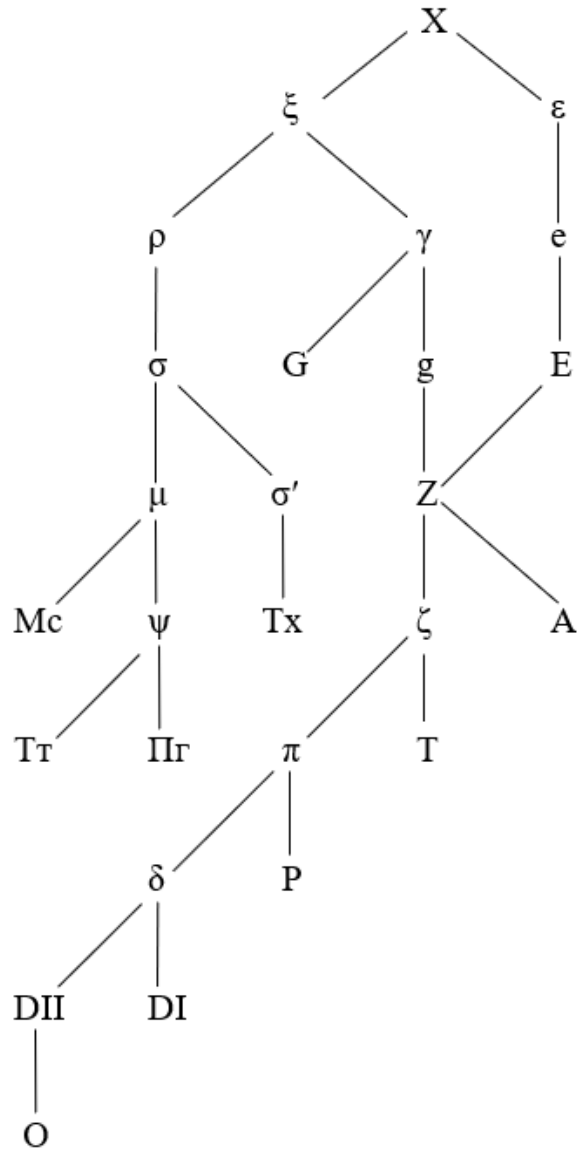


# Byzantium in c12



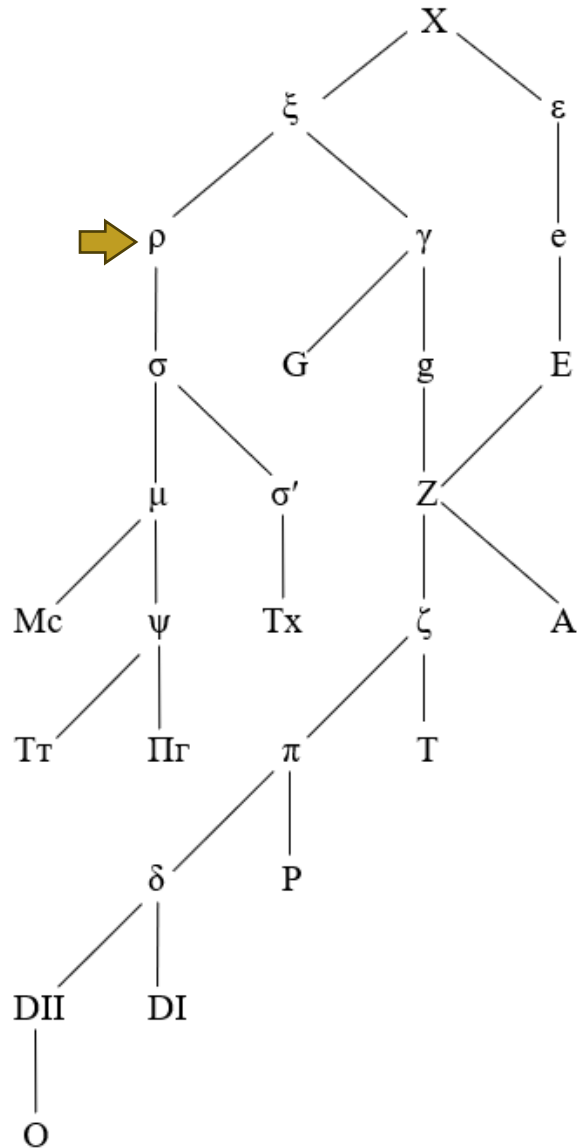


# Textual tradition of *Digenis Akritis*





# Textual tradition of *Digenis Akritis*





## The Old Slavic version (ρ) of *Digenis Akritis*

- Slavic translation (ρ), probably c14 < hyparchetype ξ
  - MSS of c16? (Mc, lost) and c18 (Tx, Tτ, Πr)
  - ρ-translator may have rendered some 2000 lines and half-lines of verse into Slavic prose; the equivalent of about 1220 lines and half-lines survive across extant manuscripts
  - Includes "Emperor" episode (5); lacks "Palace and Death" episode (8: never translated)
- Most probably originated in c14 Macedonia or S. Serbia (Vaillant): the heart of Stefan Dušan's "Empire of the Serbs and the Romans/Greeks," 1331-55
- ρ was composed in hybrid Slavonic with South Slavic elements
  - East Slavic elements grow over text's transmission; c16 Muscovite ψ-redaction is in Slavonicized Muscovite Russian (the ψ-text is also reordered, partly rewritten, and abridged)
- Episodic, with episode titles of ξ; assimilated strongly to Greek and Slavic oral traditions
- Eliminates romance conventions and pathetic fallacies in particular



# “Empire of the Serbs and the Romans/Greeks,” 1331-55



# Puzzles of the Slavic *Digenis Akritis* and their solution: the oral tradition

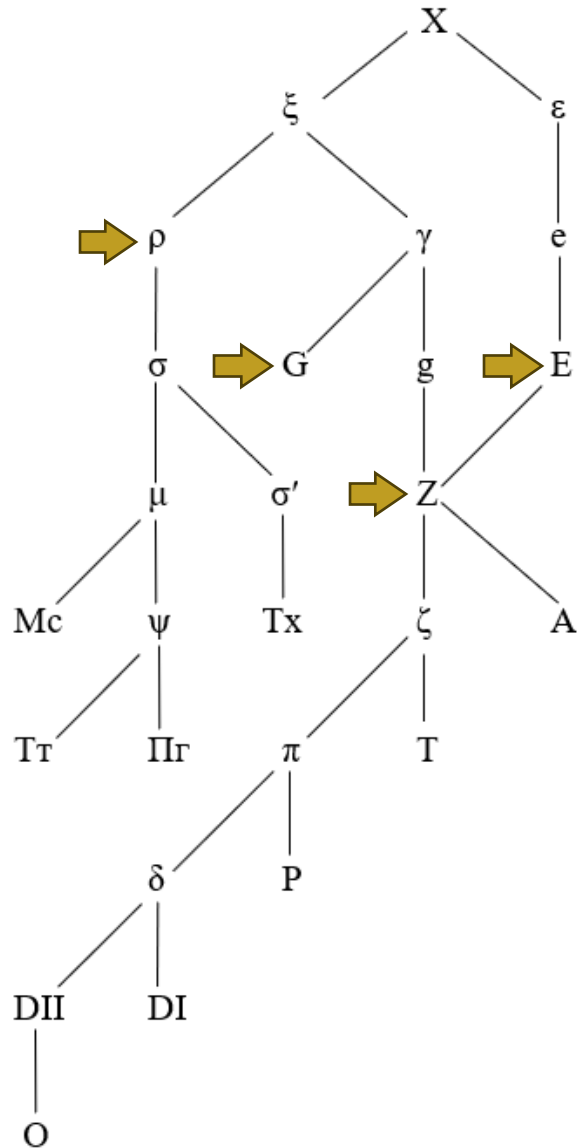
- The differences between the Slavic *Digenis* and the Greek have puzzled scholars:
  - Vaillant 1956: [Le *Digénis* slave] n'était pas une traduction du grec, mais *un récit libre d'après une version grecque* du poème"
  - Mavrogordato 1956: "Here, combined with many *folk-tale* elements ... we can recognize the chief incidents of the Greek story"
  - Graham 1974: "in the scenes present in both [languages'] versions the contrast is striking ... the Greek manuscripts follow *one sequence of events* down to small details, while the *Russian manuscripts [of the Slavic text] follow another*"
- The solution can be found in the **oral tradition** of the Modern Greeks and South Slavs
  - The translator borrowed from oral tradition to "authorize" his translation, orienting it definitively toward the epic (and away from the romance) and lending it the authority of the "singer of tales"
  - The specifics of the oral tradition can explain most if not all of the formerly puzzling differences between the medieval Greek and Slavic versions of *Digenis*



## My critical edition of the Old Slavic *Digenis Akritis*

- My critical edition is oriented to Byzantinists and Hellenists: it opens with a *limited* and *eclectic stemmatic* (or “family tree-based”) reconstruction of ρ, on *intentionalist* principles
  - *Limited*: much text is found only in two witnesses or even one, thus in places a “best-text” edition
  - *Eclectic*: recourse to the Greek traditions as well as Slavic: i.e., I go not just “up” to hyparchetype σ (= all shared Slavic MS readings), but “across” to the Greek witnesses to resolve textual problems
  - *Intentionalist*: recovering the “author’s [or translator’s] intention” (Tanselle, [cf. Howard]) justifies moving beyond the (hyp)archetype—and even beyond the translator’s holograph, if necessary
- The critical reconstruction of ρ is accompanied by:
  - Its English translation and a historical, cultural, and textual commentary in English
  - An *apparatus criticus* (not comprehensive, registering only variance in a given line from its “base”)
  - An *apparatus fabulosus* (cf. Foley 2004), or register of the translator’s oral-formulaic “rhetoric”
  - Followed by semi-diplomatic (near-literal) transcriptions of all MSS (and excerpts of lost MS Mc)

# Textual tradition of *Digenis Akritis*





# My HRFP work at the Tsakopoulos Hellenic Collection in summer 2025

- Due to the great conservatism of the oral tradition, much of the Modern Greek material that the c14 translator used can still be found in the *Akritika* (or songs of the Anatolian borderers) collected as late as the c19 and c20
- As a Hellenic Research Fellow at the Tsakopoulos Collection in July and August 2025, I:
  - Evaluated editions of the *Akritika* to determine which offer the most reliable texts to specialists, on the one hand, and which are the most “user-friendly” for non-specialists, on the other (e.g., widely available, with standardized Modern Greek orthography and/or translations into Western European languages)
  - Sought out “Akritic” transcriptions, plots, and editions previously unknown or unavailable to me (and identified several “non-canonical” variants, never cited by specialists on *Digenis*)
  - Identified many specific parallels between the *Akritika* and the Old Slavic *Digenis*
  - Determined the format of my edition’s *apparatus fabulosus* (I decided to give bibliography for all oral-formulaic parallels but not to provide or discuss the passages themselves, unlike Foley 2004)

# Building-blocks of the oral-traditional epic: *motif, formula, theme, story-pattern*

- Motif
  - **Formula**
  - **Theme**
  - **(Major theme)**
  - **Story-pattern**
- These forms make up a kind of "generative grammar" of oral-traditional epic song*
- Bolded forms are immanent to oral-formulaic composition (i.e., they are part of the traditional singer's "arsenal" and are "real" for him and his listeners)
  - **Note** that the Slavic translator of *Digenis* is *not* engaged in oral-formulaic composition as such; oral-formulaic composition (or the "formulaic style," after Zumthor) is for him a kind of *rhetoric*



# The Motif

- A **motif** is a “unit of content found in narratives” (Thompson): a recurrent character, event, or situation
  - Mostly of interest insofar as they are expressed by *formulas* and cohere into *themes* (below)
- Motifs are largely universal, and have been collected by Thompson into his monumental *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*; some motifs may be culturally specific: cf. those collected by El-Shamy in his *Motif Index of The Thousand and One Nights*
- The archetype of *Digenis Akritis* was acephalic, i.e., it had lost its opening pages; each editor had to construct a new beginning to the story
- In the Old Slavic *Digenis* alone, the *hero-brothers* who rescue their sister (Digenis’s future mother) from the Emir (his future father) are *widow’s sons*: Thompson motif L111.3
- While some Slavic heroes (e.g., Marko Kraljević) may be widow’s sons, this aspect of their character is not remarked by singers; in the Greek tradition, this is a class of hero

# “A Widow Bore a Child” 1–5: Maria Tourgouti, 1930 (Anakou, Cappadocia) and Slavic *Digenis* ρ 1.1–4 (NB this motif is not found in any Greek text of *Digenis*)

A **widow** bore a **child** and called him Prosfylis,  
she bore him behind bars, she suckled him in a  
prison.

At age one, he took up a sword, at two a spear,  
at three and four he leapt upon his mount,  
he leapt upon his mount and took to the road.

There was a certain **widow** of a Greek <city, of  
good> birth,  
who had given herself over to her salvation:  
she was never away from <God’s> church.  
She had three **sons**, most graceful,

Χήρα-ν παιδίν εγέννησε και λεν τονε Προσφύλη,  
στα σίδερα τον γέννησε, στη φυλακή τον θρέβει.

Χρονιάρης πιάνει το σπαθί, στα δύο το κλοντάρι,  
στα τρία και στα τέσσερα πηνέβ' καβαλικεύει.  
Πήνεψε, καβαλίκηψε, 'κατό δρόμους πηγαίνει.

Бѣ нѣкая **вдова** Гречка <града, блага> роду,

<яже> предала <беше> себе къ спасенію:  
отъ цѣркве <Божія> николи же отхождаше.  
И бѣша у нея три **сынове** велелѣпны,



# The Formula

- A **formula** is a “group of words, regularly employed ~~under the same metrical conditions~~ to express a given essential idea [motif]” (Parry); whether fixed or flexible, a formula is always characterized by the arbitrarily limited distribution of elements (Kiparsky)
  - A *fixed* formula is a ready-made “bound expression” with no synchronic derivation
  - No one form of a *flexible* formula is the prototype: all are “sisters of a constituent”
- A formula may be as short as a traditional epithet and its noun, or as long as several lines
- According to Foley, a formula may be expressed:
  - Idiolectally (in the individual usage of singer)
  - Dialectically (in the usage of a community)
  - Linguistically (across a whole song tradition)
- A formula is rarely shared across languages (families), as it is closely bound to a language; on the next slide is an example of a formula found only in the Modern Greek oral tradition

# “A Widow Bore a Child” 1–5: Maria Tourgouti, 1930 (Anakou, Cappadocia) and Slavic *Digenis* ρ 3.1–3 (NB these lines are not found in any Greek text of *Digenis*)

A widow bore a child and called him Prosfylis,  
she bore him behind bars, she suckled him in a  
prison.

**At age one, he took up a sword, at two a spear,  
at three** and four he leapt upon his mount,  
he leapt upon his mount and took to the road.

Most glorious Digenis, <the emir’s son,>  
**at twelve played with a sword, and in his  
thirteenth year, with a spear,  
and in his fourteenth year** he ventured to  
overcome all kinds of beasts.

Χήρα-ν παιδίν εγέννησε και λεν τονε Προσφύλη,  
στα σίδερα τον γέννησε, στη φυλακή τον θρέβει.

Χρονιάρης πιάνει το σπαθί, στα δύο το κλοντάρι,  
στα τρία και στα τέσσερα πηνέβ' καβαλικεύει.  
Πήνεψε, καβαλίκεψε, 'κατό δρόμους πηγαίνει.

Преславный Дигенъ, <сынъ амировъ,>  
‘бї’ лѣтъ мечемъ играше, а на ‘гї’ лѣто копїемъ,  
на ‘дї’ лѣто похѣпаше сѧ всякымъ звѣри побѣдити.



# The “Son of Andronikos” 9–11 (published by Spyridon Zampelios, 1859; reprinted in Stylianos Alexiou’s *editio minor* of E) and “A Widow Bore a Child” 3–5

**At age one, he took up a sword; at two a spear:**

**And when he was three,** he was held to be a hero.

He set off, he is famous, he fears nobody,

**At age one, he took up a sword, at two a spear,**

**at three** and four he leapt upon his mount,  
he leapt upon his mount and took to the road.

Χρονιὸς ἐπιάσε τὸ σπαθὶ καὶ διέτης τὸ κοντάρι

κι ὅταν ἐπάτησε τοὺς τρεῖς, κρατεῖται παλληκάρι·

Εβγῆκε, ἐδιαλαλήθηκε, κανένα δέν φοβᾶται,

Χρονιάρης πιάνει το σπαθί, στα δύο το κλοντάρι,

στα τρία και στα τέσσερα πηνέβ' καβαλικεύει.

Πήνεψε, καβαλίκηψε, 'κατό δρόμους πηγαίνει.

# The Theme

- A **theme** is a “group of ideas [or motifs] regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song”; its various instances may repeat the same formulas (Lord)
  - It is the basic building-block of the plot: motifs cohere into themes, and themes, into the “major themes” of the story-pattern (see below; Lord refers to this coherence as a “strong force”)
  - A theme can be reduced to all but a motif, or, in longer epic, expanded to include other themes
- Again, according to Foley, a theme may be expressed:
  - Idiolectally (in the individual usage of singer)
  - Dialectically (in the usage of a community)
  - Linguistically (across a whole song tradition)
  - [Themes may also be shared “ecumenically,” over a large shared space and across languages]
- On the next slides are examples of themes shared across Ottoman space but found as such (i.e., with these particular motifs) only in the Modern Greek oral tradition



# “Saracen at the border” and “Young informant” themes (NB these episodes, in *Armouris* and the Slavic *Digenis*, are not found in any Greek text of *Digenis*)

## *“Lay of Armouris,” lines 31–60*

- The imprisoned Armouris’s son Arestis reaches the Euphrates River
- A Saracen mocks him from across the river
- Arestis spurs his horse to leap the river (and succeeds with supernatural aid)
- Arestis dislocates the Saracen’s jaw with a slap and asks where the Emir’s army is
- The Saracen turns informant

## *Old Slavic Digenis Akritis, p 1.62–90*

- The three brothers reach the border of the Saracen land, away from the River Halys
- A Saracen guard strikes at them, thinking them deserters
- The youngest brother seizes Saracen by the throat; they bind him and ask where Emir is
- The Saracen turns informant, describing the Emir’s tents

# “Picked warriors” and “Surviving warrior sent off with message” themes (NB these episodes, in *Armouris* and the Slavic *Digenis*, are not found in Greek *Digenis*)

*“Lay of Armouris,” lines 61-65, 95-99*

- The Saracen boasts of having been picked as one of a hundred thousand
  - Formula: “one does not fear a thousand”
- [Arestis destroys the Emir’s army]
- Arestis catches and mutilates the lone survivor and sends him off with a message for his father

*Old Slavic Digenis Akritis, p 1.91-99*

- The Saracen boasts of the Emir’s men-at-arms and their *salaries* of a thousand
  - Formula: “one rides against a hundred”
- The brothers release him to bring back a message to the Emir

*The c14 Slavic translator of Digenis did not necessarily know the “Lay of Armouris” itself; he did know these themes, whatever their source*



# The Story-Pattern

- A **story-pattern** is a “recognizable sequence of events [elements or ‘major themes,’ themselves built up of themes] that allows for variation by character, incident, and geography as well as overall flexibility in detail” (Foley)
  - *Return* pattern (cf. *Odyssey*): analyzed by Lord and Foley; the hero is typically older and paradigmatically in disguise; its variants are *Return*, *Return-Rescue*, *-Siege*, and *-Abduction*
  - *Initiatory* pattern and its variants (cf. *Avdo's Wedding of Smail-Agić Meho*): analyzed by Bynum and Arant; the hero is paradigmatically young and not in disguise; its variants are *Initiatory-Wedding*, *-Rescue*, and *-Abduction*
- The **major themes** of the two main oral-traditional epic story-patterns are:
  - Return: **A**bsence, **D**evastation, **R**eturn, **R**etribution, and **W**edding (w/ variants for variant patterns)
  - Initiatory: **C**ontract, **C**ouncil/**C**ounsel, **I**nvitations/**J**ourney, **A**gones, and **W**edding (w/ variants)

## Puzzles of the “Abduction” episode (4) of the Old Slavic *Digenis*

- Slavic “Abduction” episode is preserved more or less complete in the more archaic Slavic version of the text (σ > MS Tx), and is confusing to scholars who know the Greek versions of *Digenis* well
- Superficially, the plots are the same, but the “sequence[s] of events” are quite different (Graham)
  - In the Greek versions Digenis begins on the road, returning home between his two visits to the girl; in the Slavic he begins at home, on his outbound journey he meets a youth of the General’s court (who serves as informant), and between visits he makes camp
  - In the Greek versions Digenis carries off the girl at the end of his second visit, offering a playful challenge to her father; in the Slavic he explicitly refuses her request to be abducted, returning for a third and fourth visit to carry off the girl, challenge her father, and knock down his house
- The “spirit and mood” of the Slavic version, in which Digenis accosts the General’s girl in a “blunt and menacing tone,” are likewise “very different from that of the Greek,” in which his speeches are “filled with words of tenderness and endearment” (Graham)
  - In the Greek G version, at least, the hero also behaves in a courtly manner toward the girl’s family, while in the Slavic he threatens to mutilate her father’s and brothers’ faces



# The *Initiatory-Abduction* story-pattern as the key to Slavic episode 4

- The Initiatory-Abduction story-pattern is rare, found only in Modern Greek: Cypriot “The Daughter of Levandis” and “Digenis Among the Raiders,” compiled into Greek “e-edition” of *Digenis* > MS E

## *Initiatory-Abduction* (Cypriot, Modern Greek):

<u>Absence</u>	<u>Council/Counsel</u>	<u>Journey</u>	<u>Agones</u>	<u>Wed.</u>
lack of girl/ hunting theme	girl is known/willing; hindered by father	young informant/ <u>Philopappous</u>	music/tests, incl. lion	
	(boast)	task	leader’s tent violated	
	(explanation)	compliance	(gate-crash)	
	(arming/departure)	arming/departure	flight with girl	
			destruction of enemy	
			mutilation of frustrating bride/kin	

# Initiatory-Abduction story-pattern in “The Daughter of Levandis” (left) and Slavic *Digenis* ρ 4 (right)

## Material absent in all Greek texts of *Digenis* is in red

- Absence
  - King’s daughter is marrying Giannakos
  - Digenis goes out to hunt and wings a partridge
- Counsel
  - A group of Roma are discussing the match, preferring Digenis to Giannakos, the groom
  - Digenis strikes their faces and demands more information
  - They give it, but refuse to go to the wedding as matchmakers
- Absence [based on “First Hunt” (ep. 3)]
  - Digenis keeps thinking about the general’s beautiful daughter
- Counsel [based on “First Hunt” (ep. 3)]
  - Digenis learns about difficulty of abducting the General’s girl from his father and mother
- [Note that the Greek ep. 4 was acephalic]

# Initiatory-Abduction story-pattern in “The Daughter of Levandis” (left) and Slavic *Digenis* ρ 4 (right)

Material absent in all Greek texts of *Digenis* is in red

- Journey (feat. “Young informant” theme)
  - Philiopappous appears; Digenis recruits him to play matchmaker
  - Digenis lends Philiopappous his clothes, arms, and horse
  - Philiopappos starts to ride off; Digenis calls him back, instructing him what to do
  - Philiopappous rides off to the wedding, tries and fails to make match (bride’s family insults Digenis); he returns to Digenis
- Journey (feat. “Young informant” theme)
  - Digenis dresses and arms, and departs for the General’s town
  - He arrives at the General’s town, encounters and recruits a youth of the General’s retinue
  - The youth informs him of the General and his sons, and the beauty of his daughter
  - The girl sees Digenis and is astounded at his beauty
  - Digenis returns, makes camp, and initiates the youth into his retinue in a celebration



# Initiatory-Abduction story-pattern in “The Daughter of Levandis” (left) and Slavic *Digenis* ρ 4 (right)

Material absent in all Greek texts of *Digenis* is in red

- Journey (*bis*)
  - Digenis reclaims his possessions and starts to ride off
  - Philiopappous calls him back, instructing him how to make a *tambouras*
  - Digenis rides off to the wedding; he makes the *tambouras*
- Journey (*bis*)
  - Digenis dresses and takes along his lute, and visits the General’s estate a second time
  - He rides to the girl, **accompanied by the youth**, and plays the lute; she falls in love
  - **She sends her nursemaid to negotiate; he threatens the girl with death**
  - The girl and Digenis converse; **he threatens her if she will not become his wife**
  - **He refuses to elope without accomplishing a feat of arms**; he puts her on his horse **but does not ride off**
  - **Digenis returns to camp for a celebration**

# Initiatory-Abduction story-pattern in “The Daughter of Levandis” (left) and Slavic *Digenis* p 4 (right)

## Material absent in all Greek texts of *Digenis* is in red

- *Agones*

- Digenis arrives at the wedding and plays *tambouras*
- Bride tests Digenis: throw and catch my large stone!
- Digenis seizes the bride and rides off, with wedding party in pursuit
- Digenis begins to slay the wedding party; the girl begs him to spare her kin
- Digenis kills a dragon and blinds a lion, setting it to guard the girl
- Digenis continues to slaughter the wedding party
- Digenis mutilates his mother-in-law for insulting him

- *Agones* (feat. “Now the Birds” theme)

- Digenis dresses and takes an extra horse, and visits the estate for a third time; he calls out the General
- He returns to destroy the General’s property, seats the girl on his horse, and departs for camp
- He returns, destroys more property, and calls out the General until he comes out to meet him in battle
- Digenis sleeps and the girl keeps watch
- Digenis slaughters the General’s troops, humiliates and threatens to mutilate him and his sons; the girl begs him to spare her kin

# Initiatory-Abduction story-pattern in “The Daughter of Levandis” (left) and Slavic *Digenis* ρ 4 (right)

## Material absent in all Greek texts of *Digenis* is in red

- Wedding
  - Digenis returns home to his father with the girl
- Wedding
  - Digenis agrees to a first wedding at his new father-in-law's estate
  - A lavish wedding follows at his own father's estate
    - [Here the Slavic text is very close to the Greek G version, down to the detailed list of wedding presents; inherited from ξ in both versions]

*The c14 Slavic translator of Digenis did not necessarily know the “Daughter of Levandis” song itself; he did know the Initiatory-Abduction story-pattern, whatever its source*



# The Slavic translator of *Digenis Akritis* used all of the building-blocks of the Modern Greek *Akritika*: *motif, formula, theme, story-pattern*

- Motif: e.g., "the widow's son as hero"
- **Formula:** e.g., "At age one, he took up a sword, and at two a spear, and at three ..."
- **Theme:** e.g., "Saracen at the border," "Young informant," "Picked warriors"
- **(Major theme)**
- **Story-pattern:** e.g., the Initiatory-Abduction pattern of "The Daughter of Levandis"
  - By consulting the *apparatus fabulosus*, the Byzantinist/Hellenist reader of my forthcoming edition of the Old Slavic *Digenis Akritis* can distinguish between the material "inherited" from the archaic version ξ of *Digenis*, and the translator's oral-formulaic "rhetoric"
  - **Thank you very much, and special thanks to George Paganelis and colleagues at Sac State!**