Constructing the image of a city-state 'at the mid-point of Asia'. Bessarion's encomium on Trebizond

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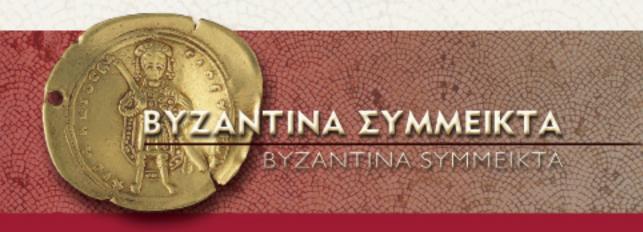# BYZANTINA ΣΥΜΜΕΙΚΤΑ

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CONSTRUCTING THE IMAGE OF A CITY-STATE
'AT THE MID-POINT OF MOST OF ASIA':
BESSARION'S *ENCOMIUM* ON TREBIZOND

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The literary genre of the ἐκφράσεις of cities, which was very popular in late antiquity, was strongly revived from the thirteenth century onwards and drew the attention of several leading scholars of the era. This development was certainly associated with the growing importance of cities in late Byzantine society and culture, a phenomenon that has been explored to some extent in the recent relevant literature[1]. In the politically fragmented world that emerged after the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204, several provincial cities became centers of power ruled by local elites with their own political agendas and respective strategies. At the same time, the commercial and cultural ties of various former and still existing Byzantine territories with Western Europe and especially with the Italian peninsula were particularly strengthened, leading both to the economic growth of

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1. See especially: T. Shawcross, Mediterranean Encounters before the Renaissance: Byzantine and Italian Political Thought Concerning the Rise of Cities, in: *Renaissance Encounters. Greek East and Latin West*, eds. M. S. Brownlee – D. H. Gondicas, Leiden and Boston 2013, 57-93; Eadem, Cities and Imperial Authority in the Western Provinces of the Byzantine Empire, 12th-14th centuries, *Medieval Worlds* 14 (2021), 35-52; some of the studies in: *Πόλεις και εξουσία στο Βυζάντιο κατά την εποχή των Παλαιολόγων (1261-1453)*, ed. A. Kontoyannopoulou, Athens 2018; and more broadly T. Kioussopoulou, *Οι «Αόρατες» βυζαντινές πόλεις στον ελλαδικό χώρο (13ος–15ος αι.)*, Athens 2013. For the emphasis on local political identities in the late Byzantine ἐκφράσεις, see: H. Saradi, Byzantine Urban Imagination: Idealisation and political thinking (eighth to fifteenth centuries), in: *Cities as Palimpsests? Responses to Antiquity in Eastern Mediterranean Urbanism*, eds. E. Key Fowden – S. Çağaptay – E. Zychowicz-Coghill – L. Blanke, Oxford and Philadelphia 2022, 265-286, at 273-282.

several urban communities and the diffusion of Western ideas and practices in the eastern Mediterranean. This "rise of the cities" caused changes in the structure of the urban societies and influenced its elites' political discourses, strategies, and broader perceptions of the world.

The writers of the period selectively borrowed themes and motifs from the late antique rhetorical tradition to praise their cities. The intersection of reality with its narrative representation was conceived through the key concept of ἐνάργεια. The term had a somewhat fluid meaning associated with the activation of imagination through a vivid descriptive discourse, the revelation of truth where the latter was mainly defined in opposition to myth, and the παραβολὴ related to metaphors, similes, and analogies. The concept's fluidity favored different discursive strategies on the author's part, depending on his political objectives and the intended audience[2]. After all, these ἐγκώμια were usually destined to be performed in public places, possibly in front of the local authorities and the city's inhabitants. This public performance provided authors with the opportunity not only to project aesthetically pleasing images of urban space but also frequently to outline specific political views and strategies in relation to the city.

It is relatively common in the recent literature on medieval cities to view public space as a dynamic and fluid field, continually produced and shaped by action, movement and its conceptualizations by the people of the era. In late Byzantine ἐκφράσεις urban space was not simply described or idealized according to specific rhetorical motifs, but it was also often related to sets of normative concepts and values. By projecting elaborate images of selected urban landmarks, associating the present situation with an historical past and outlining the relations between the city and the political

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2. On ἐνάργεια in the ancient rhetorical tradition see: R. Webb, *Ekfrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, Farnham 2009, 87-106. On ἐνάργεια in the Byzantine context, see: S. Papaioannou, Byzantine *Enargeia* and Theories of Representation, in: *EKPHRASIS. La représentation des monuments dans les littératures byzantine et byzantino-slaves. Réalités et imaginaires*, eds. V. Vavřínek – P. Odorico – V. Drbal, *Bsl* 69/3 (2011), 48-60. For a parallelism between ἐνάργεια and the modern anthropological method of "thick description" see: M. Veikou, 'Telling spaces' in Byzantium: Ekphraseis, Place Making and 'Thick Description', in: *Storytelling in Byzantium. Narratological approaches to Byzantine texts and images*, eds. Ch. Messis – M. Mullett – I. Nilsson, Uppsala 2018, 15-32.

power, their authors aimed to guide the audience's experiences, feelings and thoughts, thus defining specific codes of social/spatial conduct. They produced knowledge about the city that was being praised and transformed it into a familiar "place", namely a space endowed with particular values and socio-cultural meanings[3]. In this regard, the cities' encomia were powerful tools for communicating political discourses, forging allegiances and finally constructing civic identities. After all, spatiality is a co-constitutive part of most discourses, practices and representations related to the construction of images of the Self and the Other[4].

Bessarion's encomium provides a lengthy account of Trebizond's history, describes in some detail its urban space, and outlines a web of relations between the city and its surrounding world. This paper aims to explore the image of Trebizond in the narrative by focusing mainly on the political function of the text. The first two parts of the paper are devoted to the conceptualization of Trebizond as a city-state and the narration of its historical past. The following two sections deal respectively with the author's exploration of the city's relations with the rest of the world and the narrative representation of the urban space and its landmarks. The paper concludes by investigating the features of the political and spatial identity that Bessarion has elaborately outlined throughout the whole text.

TREBIZOND AS A CITY-STATE

The encomium on Trebizond, written between 1426/7 and 1436/7 when Bessarion was probably living in Constantinople or Mystra[5], follows in

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3. On the concept of "place" see indicatively: C.W.J. Withers, Place and the 'Spatial Turn' in Geography and in History, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70/4 (Oct. 2009), 637-658.

4. D. Massey, *For Space*, Los Angeles – London – New Delhi – Singapore – Washington D.C. 2005, 10.

5. The text has been published by Sp. Lampros (ed.), Βησσαρίωνος ἐγκώμιον εἰς Τραπεζοῦντα, *NE* 13 (1916), 145-204 [repr. Athens 2000] and by O. Lampsides (ed.), Ὁ 'εἰς Τραπεζοῦντα' λόγος τοῦ Βησσαρίωνος, *Ἀρχεῖον Πόντου* 39 (1984), 3-75. It has been recently translated into English along with Michael Panaretos' chronicle by S. Kennedy (ed. and trans.), *Two Works on Trebizond: Michael Panaretos, Bessarion*, Cambridge Mass. and London 2019, 59-215, 251-271. The textual references will henceforth be to Lampsides' edition (hereafter: Bessarion, *Encomium*). On the chronology of the work see: Kennedy, Introduction, in: *Two Works on Trebizond*, xvi-xvii, with references to the relevant older

general terms the guidelines provided by Menander's treatise on epideictic speeches where the city had to be praised for its origin, location, and deeds. The structure and the style are also deeply influenced by Libanios and especially Aelius Aristeides, as their works on Antioch and Athens respectively provided the primary exemplars for the literary genre of the ἐκφράσεις of cities in Bessarion's days[6]. Bessarion selectively borrows subjects and motifs from the late antique tradition to construct an image of a city-state with deep historical roots in the cultural and political context of ancient Greece where independent cities exercised their sovereignty over a strictly defined geographical area.

The author begins his work by repeatedly referring to Trebizond as his own πατρίς, aiming to enable his audience to strongly identify with the city. He explicitly states in the first paragraph that he intends to honor his fatherland, pay homage to his birthplace, and present to it whatever he can, as this land is the father of his fathers[7]. He states that everyone can contribute something, either large or small, to their fatherland by acting as a patron, trierarch or organizer of feasts, or by repairing the walls and building churches, shrines, and theaters. These acts aim to secure, improve, develop and show adoration for one's fatherland[8]. Bessarion feels that he lacks the ability to contribute in any other way than adorning Trebizond with words. He will repay the city for having nurtured him with the only gift that he can offer[9].

Furthermore, Bessarion explicitly describes Trebizond as a city-state with its own politically subjected hinterland. While narrating the fortunes of his fatherland under the Grand Komnenos dynasty, he observes that

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literature. For a timeline of Bessarion's early life, see: S. KENNEDY, Bessarion's Date of Birth: A New Assessment of the Evidence, *BZ* 111 (2018), 641-657.

6. For the influence on Bessarion of the late antique rhetorical tradition see: H. SARADI, Η ἔκφρασις της Τραπεζούντας από τον Βησσαρίωνα: Η αρχαιότης και το ιστορικό μήνυμα, *Βυζαντινός Δόμος* 17/18 (2009-2010), 33-56, at 34-37, 53-54; KENNEDY, Introduction, in: *Two Works on Trebizond*, xv-xvi.

7. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 20.9-11.

8. Ibid., 20.26-21.3.

9. Ibid., 21.12-22. For the literary convention of paying homage to the author's fatherland, see: E. GIARENIS, Ο λόγιος και ο γενέθλιος τόπος. Η Τραπεζούντα με τον τρόπο του Βησσαρίωνος, *ΕΕΒΣ* 53 (2007-2009), 265-280, at 268-269.

"they significantly increased the borders of our city. Instead of it being ruled, they have made it rule, and instead of it being enslaved to others, they have enabled it to enslave many others. They have made it into the capital city of everything around it and even the whole of Lazike"[10]. Bessarion gives a somewhat detailed description of the land under the city's rule. Following the norms of the literary genre, he highlights the fertility and the quality of the land, the proportional division between mountains and plains, and the rich agricultural production comprising of grain, fruit and wood[11].

This notion of Trebizond as a sovereign city with its own strictly defined dominion is particularly evident in the rather lengthy description of the Pontic Alps, which are incorrectly mentioned in the text as a subdivision of the Anti-Taurus Mountains. The author refers in detail to their geophysical features and compares them to mountains in southern Greece, the Italian Alps, and the Taurus mountain range in Cilicia[12]. The Pontic Alps are viewed as a political and cultural border "separating our land from that of Armenia and the Cilicians, and all the land which the barbarians rule"[13]. The people living on the other side of the mountain range are considered foreign as they are not familiar with the speech, the language and the Greek customs of the city[14]. Bessarion concludes by calling the Pontic Alps "our border and wall", "the regulator of each political power and dominion" since they do not permit either side to plot against the other and enter its land without the consent of its ruler[15].

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10. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 59.10-13: *Τήν τε γὰρ πόλιν ἡμῖν οὐ μικροῖς ὅροις ἐπηύξησαν, ἀντ᾿ ἀρχομένης ἄρχουσαν καταστήσαντες καὶ ἀντὶ τοῦ δουλεύειν ἑτέρους πολλοὺς ἄλλους δουλώσασαν, σχῆμά τε μητροπόλεως πρὸς τὰ κύκλῳ πάντα καὶ τὴν σύμπασαν Λαζικὴν σχοῦσαν...*

11. Ibid., 39.6-40.7. For the literary tradition of depicting an "idyllic" natural environment around the city, which usually functioned as an introduction to the representation of the urban space, see: H. SARADI, Idyllic Nature and Urban Setting: An Ideological Theme with Artistic Style or Playful Self-Indulgence, in: *EKPHRASIS. La représentation des monuments* ...[as in n. 2], 9-36.

12. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 40.7-41.17.

13. Ibid., 40.12-13: *...τὴν ἡμετέραν τῆς Ἀρμενίας ὁρίζει γῆς καὶ Κιλίκων καὶ ἧς νῦν ἄρχουσι βάρβαροι πάσης.*

14. Ibid., 40.13-14.

15. Ibid., 41.10-14. The special geophysical features of the Pontic Alps greatly strengthened Trebizond's defense against the Turkomans, forming a physical barrier along its

A major concept closely associated with the city throughout the whole text is the ideal of political liberty. Bessarion, in accordance with many Byzantine political thinkers of his era, is influenced by the classical Greek and Roman tradition and identifies liberty with freedom from "foreign" occupation. The political fragmentation that followed the capture of Constantinople in 1204 and the continuous struggle against the Latins and the Ottomans led to a politicization of the concept of "liberty". Both the official imperial discourse and several Byzantine scholars revived a classical conceptualization of political freedom as an antonym to "foreign" tyranny, an arbitrary and oppressive rule[16].

According to Bessarion, Trebizond, due to its Greek mentality, always honored liberty, avoiding and opposing slavery. After all, one must struggle to be free of the great misfortune to serve inferiors when one knows that one is far superior to one's rulers[17]. A free man and city must submit to their betters and work for their superiors since the latter can guide them in accordance with their interests and in ways they would not have been able to devise on their own. That is the best law for ruling, and in this case, slavery counterbalances freedom as it is sometimes even better when people are unable to attain virtue without someone else's guidance. If people are not ruled by such despots, they must live on their own and make the best of their

southern borders. For an analysis of the effectiveness of the defense system in the region, see: R. SHUKUROV, Between Peace and Hostility: Trebizond and the Pontic Turkish Periphery in the Fourteenth Century, *Mediterranean Historical Review* 9/1 (June 1994), 20-72, at 63-66. For a detailed survey of the settlements and the castles in the central region of the Pontic Alps, see: A. BRYER – D. WINFIELD, *The Byzantine Monuments and Topography of the Pontos*, v. 1, Washington D.C. 1985, 165-177, 299-318. For the complex political and cultural relations with the Turkomans, see: A. BRYER, Greek and Türkmens: The Pontic Exception, *DOP* 29 (1975), 113-149 (= IDEM, *The Empire of Trebizond and the Pontos*, London 1980, no. V); SHUKUROV, Between Peace and Hostility, passim; S. KARPOV, Ἱστορία τῆς αὐτοκρατορίας τῆς Τραπεζούντας, transl. E. KRITSEFSKAYA – A. EUSTATHIOU, Athens 2017, 417-439.

16. On the conceptualization of political liberty in opposition to "foreign" rule in late Byzantium see: D. ANGELOV, Three Kinds of Liberty as Political Ideas in Byzantium, Twelfth to Fifteenth Centuries, in: *Proceedings of the 22nd International Congress of Byzantine Studies*, v. 1, Sofia 2011, 311-331, especially 316-322. For the mainly civic context of the ideal of political liberty, see also: SHAWCROSS, Cities and Imperial Authority, 44-47.

17. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 46.10-14.

condition by acting in accordance with their commitment to freedom[18]. The author notes that "our people", deeply influenced by such ideas, "remained free in spirit and body for as long as possible, freely participating in the political life and administering their own affairs"[19].

Bessarion defines liberty as a political ideal linked with the city, namely a community of citizens, and in opposition to "foreign" rule by "inferior men". Moreover, the city is designated as a distinct political entity, comprised of the urban area and the surrounding lands under its sovereignty. The rulers' virtue, their superior qualities, and their ability to guide the people in accordance with the public interest are viewed as essential elements of any despotic rule that could be beneficial for the community. Otherwise, the city's people should look after and administer their affairs on their own, "maintaining their right to exercise power, their hegemony, and freedom in all regards"[20].

NARRATING TREBIZOND'S HISTORICAL PAST

The perception of Trebizond as a self-managed political community with strictly defined territorial borders leads to the production of knowledge about its historical past. A significant part of the text concerns the city's history and its descent from the classical Greek world of city-states. Bessarion traces the origins of Trebizond back to ancient Athens by highlighting the latter's political and cultural significance for the history of the γένος: "If I must start by recounting its earliest history, this city (Trebizond) originates from Attica and the city of Athens, the first political center and metropolis of the γένος, the nursemaid of the Greeks, the mother of literary culture, and the teacher of this most beautiful language"[21].

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18. Ibid., 46.16-24.

19. Ibid., 46.27-29: *...ὥστ' ἐφ' ὅσον μὲν ἐνῆν καὶ ψυχὰς καὶ σώματα διετέλεσαν ἐλεύθεροι ὄντες, μετ' ἐλευθερίας τῆς ὄντως πολιτευόμενοι καὶ τὰ καθ' αὑτοὺς διοικοῦντες...*

20. Ibid., 46.31-32: *...τὸ ἀρχικὸν τηροῦντες καὶ τὴν ἡγεμονίαν καὶ τὸ διὰ πάντων ἐλεύθερον.*

21. Ibid., 24.7-10: *Αὕτη πρώτην τοῦ γένους ἀρχὴν καὶ μητρόπολιν, εἰ δεῖ τὰ πρεσβύτερα πρότερα λέγειν, ἀττικὴν καὶ τὴν Ἀθηναίων αὐχεῖ πόλιν, την τροφὸν τῶν Ἑλλήνων, τὴν μητέρα τῶν λόγων, τῆς καλλίστης ταύτης φωνῆς τὴν διδάσκαλον.* According to F. LAURITZEN, Bessarion's political philosophy: the Encomium in Trebizond, *Bulgaria Mediaevalis* 2 (2011), 189-195, Trebizond's connection with the iconic culture of

The link between Trebizond and ancient Athens is established through the narration of a series of colonizations that are almost akin to a biological model of reproduction. Trebizond's founders came from Sinope, which had been colonized by the people of Miletos; the latter had in turn been settled by the Athenians[22]. This scheme provides a framework for structuring a narrative related to selected cities of the ancient Greek world and also for outlining a broader historical context for understanding Trebizond's own past. In other words, the spatio-cultural definition of Trebizond as a city-state functions as an organizational principle for perceiving and narrating its historical past.

The narration of ancient Athens' history is extremely concise since, according to the author, all Greeks are equally familiar with that city and the land of their birth. Bessarion states that he will pass over the many wars the Athenians waged against Greeks and barbarians and how they prevailed over their enemies and became better than them. He briefly praises Athens for its strength and power, its expansion in the world through colonization and wars, and its philanthropy that established the city as the guardian of all others[23]. The correlation of philanthropy with the protection of other cities is probably a reference to the Delian and the second Athenian Leagues, the associations of Greek city-states under the leadership of Athens[24].

On the other hand, the history of Miletos is explored at length. Miletos is considered the mother-city of Trebizond, and Bessarion states that he will mention a few things about that city and the power of its people. He aims to prove that "our γένος in the past" was far above all praise and that recently

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classical Athens contrasts Plethon's preference for a polity influenced by the ancient Spartan institutions. In my view, Bessarion's interpretative scheme is not just a response to his teacher's outlook but a well-crafted historical approach to the concept of the "city-state".

22. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 24.10-11.

23. Ibid., 24.15-27.

24. Here Bessarion probably follows Menander's view on philanthropy as an integral part of justice related to the exercise of power by the rulers. According to Menander, the emperor's philanthropy should be praised when he showed mercy towards his enemies or benefited those who submitted a petition to him. In this context, the philanthropic stance of the Athenians is manifested through the acceptance of the other cities' alleged request to protect them against the Persians. On the concept of philanthropy in Menander's rhetorical handbook and more broadly in Byzantine political thought, see: D. Angelov, *Imperial Ideology and Political Thought in Byzantium, 1204-1330*, Cambridge 2007, 112-113.

it has not been inferior to its past self[25]. He continues by summarizing Miletos' contribution to the history of the Greek city-states. The city was founded by the Athenians, and subsequently attained great power and ruled over all Ionia, achieving preeminence among the Greeks living there. All the city's accomplishments over time in favor of itself and the Greeks of Asia, as well as its endurance in the struggle against the neighboring "barbarians", who were both numerous and wealthy, attest to this fact[26].

The narration of the Milesians' wars against the "barbarian" people and rulers of Asia is somewhat lengthy, aiming to highlight the value of political freedom through its opposition to a despotic and tyrannical rule. Bessarion recounts the continual failed efforts of the Lydian kings to conquer Miletos, while most of the other Ionian cities had submitted to their power[27]. He notes that the Persian kings respected the city for its martial virtues and recognized its preeminence among the Ionians[28]. Miletos' leading role during the Ionian revolt is praised, although the author avoids any reference to its eventual conquest by the Persians and the tragic events that followed[29]. He concludes this part of the work on the city's history by stating that, in terms of its power and prosperity, Miletos was for Asia what Athens was for Europe[30].

The depiction of Sinope that follows focuses more on its landscape and location than its history. The author praises the city for being a coastal as well as an inland settlement, hence combining the attributes of sea and land, as it is well situated in both regards[31]. Then he describes the geophysical features of its peninsula, the anchorages, the eastern bay where the main harbor was situated, and the cultivated lands on the outskirts[32]. Its geographical location is regarded as central, in between two of the world's greatest rivers, the Nile and the Danube respectively[33]. The value of a city's central location

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25. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 24.28-34.
26. Ibid., 24.35-25.5.
27. Ibid., 25.6-26.18.
28. Ibid., 27.10-16.
29. Ibid., 27.16-26.
30. Ibid., 27.28-30.
31. Ibid., 28.4-8.
32. Ibid., 28.8-24.
33. Ibid., 28.24-28.

is subsequently explored at length when Bessarion analyzes the particular geographical features of Trebizond itself.

There are only two references in the text to Sinope's ancient past. The author recounts the colonization of its peninsula by a group of Cimmerians before the arrival of the Milesian settlers and the war between the newcomers and the Lydians[34]. He also devotes a few lines to the life of Diogenes the Cynic. Although the latter lived in almost every part of the known world, he was born and raised in Sinope. The author praises him for his wisdom, his knowledge of divine concepts, and his outlook on practical and ethical issues concerning man and his spirit. Diogenes is also presented as an active public intellectual who rebuked or advised tyrants and kings, taught private citizens, and publicly served the common good[35].

Trebizond, founded by settlers from Sinope, surpassed its mother-city in such a way that it would be difficult to find another, better analogous example[36]. Moreover, it is regarded as the last worthy descendant of ancient Athens. In Bessarion's words, "it even rivals the best of the best cities, and it has thus come to resemble an image of Attica and the city of Athens in many of its qualities, indeed as close an imitation as possible"[37]. Trebizond imitates Athens' political community and philanthropy –the latter probably meaning the ability to protect others by leading leagues of cities–, and the Athenians' native traits, the abundance of their power, their might in wars and battles, and all the attributes that adorned Attica[38].

The narration of the city's ancient history is extensive and structured around the contrast between a Greek city-state guided by the ideal of political liberty and the despotic "barbarian" world surrounding it. Bessarion clearly defines the borders between the two sides by highlighting cultural and political traits, namely the language, the value of freedom, and equality before the law, as the major factors that separated the people of Trebizond

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34. Ibid., 28.33-29.15.

35. Ibid., 29.15-24.

36. Ibid., 30.5-7.

37. Ibid., 30.7-10: *Ταῖς τε γὰρ τῶν ἀρίστων ἀρίσταις ἐφάμιλλον παρέχεται ἑαυτὴν καὶ πρὸς τὴν Ἀττικὴν καὶ τὴν πόλιν τῶν Ἀθηνῶν ἐξεικασμένη τοῖς πλείοσιν ἐκείνης εἰκὼν καὶ ἀκριβὲς ὡς ἐνῆν ἀπείργασται μίμημα.*

38. Ibid., 30.18-21.

from the "barbarians" who encircled them in great numbers[39]. The Persian Empire surrounded the city, but the Trapezuntines, although they lacked the manpower and the strength, immediately proved that they were Greeks, a *γένος* free in mind and body and not disposed to be ruled despotically and enslaved. Therefore, they imitated the stance of their Sinopite, Milesian and Athenian forefathers[40]. They not only did nothing unworthy of their ancestry and their Greek beliefs, but they also managed everything with reference to them, making them their model and paradigm, acting as the inheritors not of their land but rather of their virtues[41].

The author avoids any reference to the subjugation of the city to the Persians, almost implying that it remained free and self-governing throughout the life of the Achaemenid Empire. However, he devotes several paragraphs of the work to the episode concerning the arrival at Trebizond of Xenophon and the Ten Thousand. The same motif of praising the ideal of liberty, the Greek cultural traits, and the Athenian paradigm provides the framework of the narrative. The people of Trebizond decided to aid the Ten Thousand because of their prowess, invincibility in war, philanthropy and mildness. They refused to overlook suppliants of the same origin, language, and tongue, who were champions and brave defenders of liberty[42]. The forefathers of the Trapezuntines welcomed the Ten Thousand into the city, ignored the hostility of the Persians for the sake of their relation with these men, and gave them safe passage as far as Sinope[43]. The city was inclined to

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39. Ibid., 42.9-12: *Ἐντεῦθεν Ἕλληνες ἄνθρωποι καὶ τὴν Ἑλλήνων φωνήν τε καὶ γλῶτταν προϊέμενοι καὶ τιμῶντες ἐλευθερίας τε καὶ ἰσονομίας ἀντιποιούμενοι μόνοι μέσον ᾤκουν βαρβάρων, κύκλῳ περικεχυμένων ἐς πλῆθος* ... See also ibid., 42.28-30: ... *διεγίγνοντο φύσει τοῖς βαρβάροις ὄντες πολέμιοι καὶ ἀσύμβατοι καὶ μεγίστοις αὐτῶν ὅροις φωνῇ τε καὶ ψυχῇ διιστάμενοι καὶ κοινὸν οὐδὲν αὐτοῖς ἔχοντες.*

40. Ibid., 42.14-19: *Ἄρτι γοῦν συνῳκισμένοι καὶ οἷα εἰκὸς τόν τε ἀριθμὸν ὄντες οὐ πάνυ πολλοὶ τήν τε ἰσχὺν ἀσθενεῖς, ὅμως εὐθὺς ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἔδειξαν Ἕλληνες ὄντες, γένος ἀδέσποτον καὶ ἀδούλωτον καὶ μόνον ἐλεύθερον τήν τε ψυχὴν τά τε σώματα, Σινωπεῖς τε καὶ Μιλησίους καὶ ἔτι πρότερον Ἀθηναίους τοὺς σφῶν πατέρας μιμούμενοι* ...

41. Ibid., 42.25-28: *οὐδ' ἀνάξιον οὐδὲν τῶν προγόνων καὶ τῆς ἑλληνικῆς ἐπεδείξαντο δόξης, ἀλλ' ὥσπερ οὐ γῆς μᾶλλον ἢ τῆς ἐκείνων ἐκπεμφθέντες ἀρετῆς κληρονόμοι πρὸς αὐτούς τε διεπράττοντο πᾶν ἀναφέροντες κἀκείνους καὶ τύπον ποιούμενοι καὶ παράδειγμα...*

42. Ibid., 44.12-15.

43. Ibid., 45.21-23.

achieve the best results all on its own, without anyone having taught it in advance, since it was emulating the Athenians and their deeds[44].

The Roman period of Trebizond's history is explored at length. According to the author, the Trapezuntines attached themselves to the Roman despots of the world and their best and most just rule by gladly getting rid of their previous sovereigns, namely Mithridates I and the kings of the Pontos descended from him[45]. The history of the Hellenistic kingdom of the Pontos is narrated in some detail, with a special focus on its conflicts, first with Antigonos I and then with the Romans[46]. Pompey's final victory over Mithridates VI is regarded as the beginning of an era of freedom from "barbarian" overlordship since after that event, the city joined the empire of the Romans and handed over its rule to them[47]. The whole relation between Rome and the Greek cities is defined through metaphors referring to family bonds. The Romans were the only ones to rule over all Greek lands, and worthily at that, since they acted as guardians and fathers, real rulers and sovereigns, guiding their subjects to behave in their own interest[48]. Rome was like a strong, confident and very knowledgeable younger brother who ruled jointly with his older sibling, on whom he relied for advice. The latter had attained much knowledge, facility in speech and experience in life but was too old to manage anything. The Romans admired the Greek language and history and highly esteemed the Greeks for their wise counsels[49]. It was mostly the Greeks who were the leaders rather than the other way round, and such was the form of their alliance[50].

In the broader context of the close bonds between the two parts, Trebizond benefited from the honor and care of the Romans; in return, it remained respectful and faithful to its rulers throughout the nearly one thousand five hundred years that it passed under Roman rule[51]. The nature

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44. Ibid., 46.7-10.

45. Ibid., 47.11-15.

46. Ibid., 47.15-49.19.

47. Ibid., 49.19-22. In reality, after the end of the Mithridatic wars in 63 B.C., Trebizond formed part of the Polemonian kingdom, a client state of Rome. It joined the Roman Empire over one century later. See: Karpov, Ἱστορία, 63-67; Kennedy, Two works, 263.

48. Bessarion, Encomium, 49.25 - 30. Cf. also ibid., 49.32-33.

49. Ibid., 50.15-23.

50. Ibid., 50.33-34.

51. Ibid., 51.1-11.

of the Roman regime had changed during this period. Dictators, consuls, the Senate and generals had led and administered the state's affairs in previous times, but later a monarch had taken control and passed down to posterity the imperial regime. This kind of governance of the Roman people and their subjects had continued up to Bessarion's day, even after the transfer of the imperial capital to Byzantion and the eastern half of the empire[52]. Throughout all these times and changes, the city accepted Roman rule for two main reasons: Rome's philanthropy and mildness[53]. The concept of "philanthropy" in this context possibly refers to the way in which the Romans protected and benefited their cities, like the ancient Athenians who administered the city-states belonging to their league in similar fashion.

Bessarion subsequently returns to the theme of conflict between the city, now regarded as a stronghold of the Roman Empire, and the surrounding "barbarian" world. He recounts the struggle with the Persian Empire, especially during the 6th century, when Trebizond was used as a major base of the Roman armies[54]. The eventual losses of the eastern provinces to the Arabs in the seventh century and then of Asia Minor to the Turks from the late thirteenth century onwards are mentioned in just one paragraph, where Trebizond is presented as the only city in the region that managed to defeat the "barbarians"[55]. However, Bessarion, later in the text, recounts the occupation of most of Asia Minor by the Seljuks after 1071 and the following Byzantine reaction to highlight the crucial role of Alexios I Komnenos in the course of the events[56]. The significance of Trebizond for

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52. Ibid., 51.12-17.

53. Ibid., 51.17-22.

54. Ibid., 52.14-54.10. On the political and military role of Trebizond during the wars against the Persians in the 6th and 7th centuries, see: Karpov, Ιστορία, 75-78. On Heraklios' policy in the region during his Persian wars see: A. Bryer, Cities of Heraclius, *BMGS* 4 (1978), 15-30 (=Idem, *The Empire of Trebizond and the Pontos* [as in n. 15], no. 1).

55. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 52.5-13.

56. Ibid., 57.12-58.22. In reality, the region of Pontos retained a semi-autonomous status under the rule of the local Gabras family for much of the period between 1071 and 1140. See: Karpov, Ιστορία, 89-96. On the history of the Gabras family see: A. Bryer, A Byzantine family: The Gabrades, c. 979 – c. 1653, *University of Birmingham Historical Journal* 12 (1970), 164-187 (= Idem, *The Empire of Trebizond and the Pontos* [as in n. 15], no. IIIa); Idem – S. Fassoulakis – D. M. Nicol, A Byzantine family: The Gabrades. An Additional Note, *BSl* 36 (1975), 38-45 (= Idem, *The Empire of Trebizond and the Pontos* [as in n. 15], no.

the Roman emperors is eventually summarized in the following words: "it had to become a defender and bastion of our kings, even of their very body, taking on the role of a bodyguard"[57].

The period after the foundation of the Empire of Trebizond by Alexios I Megas Komnenos is considered a continuation of the previous era and similar motifs and ideas are used to outline the relations between the city and its rulers[58]. Bessarion explores the roots of Trebizond's royal dynasty and praises the virtue and the effective rule in troubled times of its progenitor Alexios I Komnenos[59]. Following traditional motifs of imperial rhetoric, the rise to power of the Komnenos family is related both to God's will[60] and the consent of the Roman people, who gladly accepted their rule[61]. According to Bessarion, Trebizond's current rulers are deemed worthy of the royal title not so much on account of their lineage but their way of governing, which closely follows the paradigm of their ancestors[62]. The latter possessed excellent knowledge of politics, were so much better at war than everyone else, and made their souls an artifact that embodied every virtue[63].

The relation between the ruling dynasty and the city is again outlined through metaphors associated with strong family bonds. The kings love their people as a father does his children, displaying the affections not so much of

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IIIb); IDEM, Theodore Gabras, duke of Chaldia (d. 1098) and the Gabrades: portraits, sites and seals, in: *Βυζάντιο, κράτος και κοινωνία. Μνήμη Νίκου Οικονομίδη*, eds. A. AVRAMEA – A. LAIOU – E. CHRYSSOS, Athens 2003, 51-70.

57. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 56.10-12: *...τοῖς βασιλεῦσιν ἡμῖν ὑπερασπιστήν τε καὶ πρόβολον, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτοῦ σώματος αὐτοῖς γεγονέναι, ἐν σωματοφυλάκων καθεστῶσαν αὐτοῖς μοίρᾳ.*

58. The whole account of this period praises the role of the royal dynasty. See in detail: E. GIARENIS, Η Ἔκφρασις του Βησσαρίωνα για την Τραπεζούντα. Η χρονολόγηση του έργου και το εγκώμιο των Μεγαλοκομνηνών αυτοκρατόρων, in: *Βησσαρίων εκ Τραπεζούντος του Πόντου. Λόγιος του βυζαντινού και του δυτικού αναγεννησιακού 15ου αιώνα*, eds. E. GIARENIS – A. MARAS – CH. BALOGLOU – TH. KYRIAKIDES, Thessaloniki 2017, 175-208.

59. See above, note 56.

60. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 58.3-5.

61. Ibid., 56.30-32.

62. Ibid., 56.21-25.

63. Ibid., 58.25-28: *...οὕτω μὲν τὴν πολιτικὴν ἐπιστήμην ἀρίστους, οὕτω δὲ τὰ πολεμικὰ πάντων κρατίστους, οὕτω δὲ διὰ πάντων διήκοντας καὶ καλῶν ἄγαλμα πάντων τὴν σφετέραν καταστησαμένους ψυχήν.*

a ruler but of a parent. They oversee their betterment by watching over them and looking to their future interests, like parents, since they believe that more effective government results from ruling the best possible subjects. The kings would never exchange their subjects for anyone else, as in that case, they would not be able to expand their authority for fear of the "barbarian" people under their rule. On the other hand, the Trapezuntines would never change their despots and seek out others only to make their own situation worse[64]. The strong, mutually beneficial relationship between Trebizond and the royal dynasty is eventually described in the following words: "Almighty God, may you guide the royal family and its rule, manage our affairs well and make stronger each of us through one another; the kings through the city, the city and our γένος through the kings"[65].

Trebizond's prosperity under the rule of the Megas Komnenos family is extensively explored in the last pages of the text, where the author thoroughly analyzes the features of the urban space[66]. Apart from praising the kings' major contribution in ensuring the city's expansion and well-being, Bessarion, following the traditional motifs of imperial rhetoric, also highlights their role as military leaders. He pays special attention to the city's warlike qualities, the composition and the continuous training of the army, and the rulers' role as guiders and tutors of the citizens in military issues[67]. The destruction of two powerful foreign armies which attacked Trebizond is also narrated in some detail; the author praises the bravery of the citizens who defended the city walls and God who invigorated the defenders[68].

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64. Ibid., 59.16-26.

65. Ibid., 60.7-10: ... θεὲ ἡγεμόνιε, τὸ γένος τῶν βασιλέων καὶ ἰθύνοις μὲν τὴν βασιλείαν αὐτοῖς, εὖ δὲ τὰ ἡμέτερα διαθείης καὶ δι' ἀλλήλων ἀλλήλους κρατύνοις, τῇ τε πόλει τοὺς βασιλεῖς καὶ τοῖς βασιλεῦσι τὴν πόλιν τε καὶ τὸ γένος ἡμῖν.

66. See below in detail.

67. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 65.26-66.30.

68. Ibid., 67.4-68.13. The first event has been identified either with a Turkoman attack in 1341, or with the Genoese attempt to burn down Trebizond's shipyard in 1304. See: KENNEDY, *Two works*, 270, with references to the relevant older literature. On the events related to the Turkoman attack in 1341 see: A. SAVVIDES, Ἱστορία τῆς αὐτοκρατορίας τῶν Μεγάλων Κομνηνῶν τῆς Τραπεζοῦντας (1204-1461), Thessaloniki 2009, 97; KARPOV, Ἱστορία, 429. On the armed conflict with the Genoese see: SAVVIDES, Ἱστορία, 83-84; KARPOV, Ἱστορία, 315-316. The second event can be probably identified with a well-known Seljuk assault in 1222/3 led by the son of the sultan of Rum that ended up with the annihilation of the invading army

A linear genealogical perspective leading back to Athens, which is outlined as the archetypical city-state of the *γένος*, forms the interpretive framework for the narration of Trebizond's history. Bessarion particularly stresses the importance of the survival and, indeed, flourishing in his native city of ancient Greek political values. He notes that Trebizond has surpassed all the other cities mentioned in the text as its ancestors, even though those cities were famous in the past for their illustrious rule, power and everything else[69]. Not even the name of Miletos remains in Bessarion's day, while one would cry if one saw the current inhabitants of Sinope and their rulers. Furthermore, Athens and the whole land of Attica are causes of shame; they are in a really bad state[70]. In sharp contrast to the decline of Miletos and Athens, the future of Bessarion's own city is viewed by him with great confidence: "Our affairs have gone better than we could hope, and time which makes everything old, but itself always remains flourishing and young, has transmitted only to us its nature, and kept our city fortunate and prosperous. And that, when almost more time has passed since it led Miletos and Athens to decline than since our city was first founded"[71].

It is also worth noting that the term *γένος* has mainly political and not broader ethnic connotations throughout the whole text. *Γένος* was frequently used by the Byzantines in the sense of family, but it could also denote a group of people who the author believed shared a common biological, cultural, or even political origin[72]. In using this term, Bessarion mainly emphasizes the political aspects of a common descent. He is not interested in narrating in detail the history of a group of people with alleged common blood ties, language and customs; he mainly aims at linking Trebizond to a political culture originating from the cities of ancient Greece where the ideal of civic liberty prevailed, the rulers had to consider the will of the citizens and the

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and the capture of its leader. On this event see: SAVVIDES, *Ιστορία*, 58-60; KARPOV, *Ιστορία*, 407-408, where the author dates the attack to probably 1230.

69. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 69.23-26.

70. Ibid., 69.26-30.

71. Ibid., 69.30-35: Ἡμῖν δὲ χωρεῖ τὰ πράγματα κρεῖττον ἢ κατ' εὐχήν, καὶ ὁ πάντα μὲν γηράσκων χρόνος, αὐτὸς δ' ἀκμάζων καὶ νεάζων ἡμῖν μόνοις τῆς ἑαυτοῦ μετέδωκε φύσεως, ἐν ἀκμῇ τὰ τῆς εὐτυχίας τῇ πόλει συνέχων, καὶ ταῦτα πλείων παραρρυεὶς ἤδη σχεδὸν ἀφ' οὗ Μίλητον ὑφ' ἑαυτὸν ἐποιήσατο καὶ Ἀθήνας ἢ ὅσον ἔφθασαν ἐκεῖναι οἰκισθεῖσαι τὴν ἡμετέραν.

72. G. PAGE, *Being Byzantine. Greek Identity before the Ottomans*, Cambridge 2008, 41-42.

ways of governing had to serve the common good. Bessarion does not focus so much on the ethnic roots of his πατρὶς but on its role as the political heir of the ancient Greek world of city-states.

A CITY "AT THE MID-POINT OF MOST OF ASIA"

A common feature of all ἐκφράσεις in this era is the rather detailed description of the praised city's geographical location in relation to the rest of the world. The authors were certainly influenced by the late antique ἐγκώμια of cities, which usually analyzed in detail similar issues[73]. However, the exploration of the city's geographical features provided the opportunity for an examination of its broader geopolitical status. In the same vein, Bessarion devotes several pages of his work to explore Trebizond's location and its ties with the surrounding countries and the broader region of the Black Sea.

He begins by stating that Trebizond is not located at the center of everything and of the entire earth; only one city and one place could claim this status[74]. Bessarion implies that only Constantinople and no other city could be considered as the center of the world. After all, the role of Constantinople was crucial in the imagined geographies of the empire. Being the seat of both the emperor and the patriarch, it was viewed as the global center of power, according to the traditional Byzantine perceptions of the world. Moreover, its central geographical position between Asia and Europe, "East" and "West", led Byzantine intellectuals, from as early as the fourth century, to liken it to the "eye" of the οἰκουμένη, a concept that implied a hierarchical relationship between the city and the rest of the civilized world[75].

Bessarion then focuses on analyzing the location of Trebizond in relation to its surrounding territories. He notes that the city is not at the center of an

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73. For the depiction of Constantinople's location at the center of the οἰκουμένη in Metochites' *Βυζάντιος* and the similar representation of Rome by Aelius Aristides, see: H. Saradi, Οι ταυτότητες της Κωνσταντινούπολης στον *Βυζάντιο* του Θεόδωρου Μετοχίτη και τα ιστορικά μηνύματα, in: *Πόλεις και εξουσία στο Βυζάντιο* [as in n.1], 25-27.

74. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 30.27-31.1.

75. D. Angelov, 'Asia and Europe Commonly Called East and West': Constantinople and Geographical Imagination in Byzantium, in: *Imperial Geographies in Byzantine and Ottoman Space*, ed. S. Bazzaz – Y. Batsaki – D. A Angelov, Washington, D.C., 2013, 43-68, at 52-58.

Attica, or Greece, a minor region, measured in small distances and defined by narrow borders, but is located at the center of most of Asia's peoples and cities. Persians, Medes, Sabirs and Kolchians live beyond its eastern borders, while Cappadocians, Cilicians, Galatians and Lydians surround it to the west. These people look like they are orbiting or swirling around Trebizond in a harmonious circular dance. The city is no less robust than any other in its production, but by receiving its neighbors' products it has become the world's common treasury and workshop, a kind of sea of goods[76].

The author also uses the metaphor of a circle, with Trebizond at the center, while its surrounding regions form a circumference of points almost equally distanced from the city[77]. Trebizond is located almost at the mid-point of the whole Pontos and Black Sea region, making it safe and easy to sail to the regions on either side of it in order to import and export goods. Moreover, the contacts with the people and the cities of the other continent, Europe, are frequent due to the city's superior location[78].

The Black Sea's special features are explored in detail by Bessarion. Trebizond is located at the center of a very great sea, which, as its name implies (*Εὔξεινος Πόντος*), is characterized by benevolence and accessibility[79]. People know from their experience that they can sail anywhere safely and without trouble; there is no other bay or sea anywhere else like it. It does not harbor a Scylla or a Charybdis, and there is no ebb and flow from the rise and fall of tides. There is no Sicilian strait there, nor the rocky shores, hidden reefs and shoals of the Atlantic Ocean[80]. Its size is neither huge nor small, and it is possible to traverse and explore the whole of the Pontic Sea and reach anywhere on its shores within a few days[81]. It has kept itself perfectly centered and has thus come to appreciate the value of moderation[82]. Moreover, the Black Sea is the sixth of the ten largest known seas, holding the middle position among them[83].

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76. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 31.17-31.
77. Ibid., 31.31-33.
78. Ibid., 32.3-8.
79. Ibid., 32.11-15.
80. Ibid., 32.21-28.
81. Ibid., 32.33-33.3.
82. Ibid., 33.4-5: ... ἐπὶ τοῦ μέσου τε καὶ ὀρθοῦ τετήρηκεν ἑαυτόν, τιμήσας τὸ μέτριον...
83. Ibid., 33.7-9.

The author then examines the geomorphology of the Black Sea and supports the view that it would be better described as an "open sea" (θάλασσα) and not a "πέλαγος", since it lacks any islands or larger bodies of land emerging in its midst[84]. Its bays and natural harbors are located at moderate distances from one another, providing shelter to travelling ships and granting access to docks, markets and other luxuries. All these features offer a significant advantage over other seas where contrary winds often blow, and islands are scattered all around; in such seas there is a danger of crashing on rocks or sinking into the abyss[85].

Even calmer and more friendly to humans are the waters around the city. Although the Trapezuntines have two harbors second to none, namely the Hyssian and the Rizous, sailors and seamen do not use them. During the spring and the summer, and sometimes in the winter as well, they can dock at will wherever there is a beach using only one anchor or a single rope. They use every beach and any suitable piece of land by the sea instead of harbors, securing themselves and their boats anywhere they want[86]. Bessarion remarks "that nature cleverly matched and dexterously arranged everything in this particular location, foreseeing the city that would be created here and how it would surpass the others in naval affairs, overpower them with its triremes, and defeat its enemies with its ships"[87].

Bessarion then returns to the exploration of Trebizond's privileged geographical location by arguing that the city lies in between East and West, North and South. By occupying the mid-point of the Pontos region, the Trapezuntines interact effortlessly with the peoples of Galatia, Pamphylia, Cilicia and the Euphrates. They reach the more distant eastern and southern cities by ship and, most of all, on foot. They also travel to the lands across the Black Sea and visit the territories of the Sarmatians, Kolchians, Albanians and Iberians. From there the northern cities are also accessible while the western ones are not far away. The great distance to the West is shortened

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84. Ibid., 33.10-17.

85. Ibid., 33.19-30.

86. Ibid., 34.5-15.

87. Ibid., 34.15-19: Ὥσπερ γάρ, οἶμαι, τῆς φύσεως εὐφυῶς τε καὶ δεξιῶς τὰ τῇδε πάντα διαθεμένης, ἅτε προειδομένης τὴν ἐσομένην ἐνταῦθα πόλιν καὶ ὡς τοῖς τε ἄλλοις καὶ τῷ ναυτικῷ πλεῖστον διοίσει καὶ τριήρεσι περιέσται καὶ ναυσὶ κρατήσει τῶν κατ᾽ αὐτήν.

by using ships, and the Trapezuntines can easily encounter those people. Thus, as if the city were a common workshop and marketplace for the whole οἰχουμένη, one might see people from all over the world living there for most of the year, and it would not be difficult to investigate the best-known peoples and languages[88].

Following the literary tradition of the genre, Bessarion concludes his analysis of Trebizond's geographical location by commenting on its climate and praising its mild features. He notes that the city, in line with nature, logic and reason, has seasons that, except for a few days, match the proper character of each. According to astronomers and those who study the celestial phenomena, the entire breadth of the known world is divided into eighty parts, from the hottest to the coldest zone. These scholars teach that Trebizond lies beneath the forty-third parallel and attest that it occupies the mid-range of the whole world's breadth[89]. Consequently, it lies at equal distances from both extremes of heat and cold, and so has a winter and a summer that do not exceed what these seasons' names suggest[90].

Bessarion's analysis of Trebizond's geographical location stresses the role of the city at the center of a circle formed by the surrounding Asian territories and the lands across the Black Sea. The city is depicted as lying at the mid-point of a network of maritime and overland trade routes, a predominantly economic hub in between East and West, North and South. The economic interaction with vast regions, mainly of Asia but also of Europe, is highlighted as an integral element of its identity throughout its existence.

Trebizond was indeed a thriving port city, especially from the second half of the 13th century onwards. The city was closely linked with the Venetian and Genoese maritime networks in the East. It was an important port in the continental trade route that connected, via the Black Sea, the northern Italian city-states with Tabriz and Central Asia. On a local level, the trade contacts, particularly with Georgia and the Crimea region, were

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88. Ibid., 36.23-37.3. The author then proceeds to make a colorful description of the marketplace which will be analyzed in the following section about the representation of the urban space.

89. Ibid., 37.34-38.5.

90. Ibid., 38.5-8.

also dense. The long-distance trade of the era was certainly influenced by several factors, such as changes in the geopolitical situation in Central Asia, the political rivalry between Venice and Genoa, disputes between the emperor and the Western powers, and the periodic outbreak of epidemics. However, in Bessarion's day, the volume of Venetian trade in particular was experiencing an increase in Trebizond that lasted until the middle of the 15th century, leading to a consequent increase in the state's income from customs duties[91].

Bessarion's exclusively territorial understanding of "Asia" and "Europe" is typical of the broader Byzantine perceptions of these terms at this time. Unlike Western humanists who had already in the second half of the 14th century started to perceive the two continents as opposite political and cultural categories, late Byzantine scholars continued to attribute to them only purely geographical characteristics[92]. Trebizond's relation with Asia was not viewed by Bessarion from a spatial perspective interlinked with a discourse about Asiatic or Oriental otherness and inferiority. The city was regarded as the "mid-point" of much of Asia, mainly in geographical terms,

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91. For the trade of Trebizond during this period, see especially: S. P. Karpov, The Impact of the Italian Trade on the development of the Black Sea Region and Pontic Hellenism, in: *Ρωσία και Μεσόγειος. Πρακτικά Α΄ Διεθνούς Συνεδρίου (Αθήνα 19-22 Μαΐου 2005)*, ed. O. Katsiardi-HEering – A. Kolia-Dermitzaki – K. Gardika, v. 1, Athens 2011, 223-236; Idem, *Ιστορία*, 151-158; A. Akişic-Karakullukcu, The Empire of Trebizond in the World-Trade System: Economy and Culture, in: *Trade in Byzantium. Papers from the Third International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium*, ed. P. Magdalino– N. Necipoğlu – I. Jevtić, Istanbul 2016, 323-336. For the Venetian trade between c. 1420 – c. 1450, see: Karpov, *Ιστορία*, 289-291, with references to the older secondary literature. The circulation of manuscripts provides another interesting aspect of the city's relations with the world. According to G. Peers, Trebizond and its world through manuscripts, in: *Byzantium's Other Empire*, ed. A. Eastmond Istanbul 2016, 103-126, most of the available material points to stronger bonds with the Islamic East and the Caucasus region than with Western Europe.

92. Angelov, Asia and Europe, 62-64. For the perception of Asia/East and Europe/West as opposite political and cultural categories by some Italian humanists who were concerned with the Ottoman expansion in the Balkans, see: N. Bisaha, *Creating East and West. Renaissance Humanists and Ottoman Turks*, Philadelphia 2004, 84-87, 115-116. For a broader analysis of a few Western late medieval attitudes towards the East that constituted, according to the author, an early form of orientalism, see: S. C. Akbari, *Idols in the East. European Representations of Islam and the Orient*, Ithaca and London 2009.

following the traditional Byzantine outlook on the continents, but also in regard to the economy, as a flourishing trading center situated in between different lands and peoples.

THE NARRATIVE REPRESENTATION OF THE URBAN SPACE

The section of the text dealing with the urban space begins with praise for the royal dynasty's efforts to improve the city's infrastructure. Bessarion notes that the rulers have increased the area bounded by the walls and have constructed churches, houses and markets. There are now many more citizens there, who are wealthier and more prosperous. Therefore, Trebizond has experienced the opposite of many other cities, which prospered at first and then fell on hard times and witnessed their growth decline. The city has not stopped progressing and growing ever since starting from humble roots[93].

The whole depiction of the urban space aims at stressing the image of a city in a phase of expansion and growing prosperity. Following the narrative structure of most of the ἐγκώμια of cities during this period, the author starts with the description of the walls. The latter were considered essential elements of a city's identity since they constituted the material and symbolic borders of the urban space by distinguishing an "inside" world from an "outside" one[94]. However, Bessarion subsequently undermines their role as stable urban boundaries and identity markers by narrating the history of their expansion and then the development of new districts outside the walls. He remarks that the circuit wall surrounded only a limited area at first, so later a second wall was erected around it and then a third one was built which now extends over a great distance. In the old days the city occupied only the site of the current ἀκρόπολις and used to have two entrances, with one leading out towards the interior and the other to the seaward section of the city. The second wall did not entirely encircle the older one, but was constructed to the north and stretched as far as the sea, while the southern gate remained an outer one[95]. Additional gates were built in the new circuit

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93. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 60.11-19.

94. On the symbolic meanings of the city walls, see: Ch. Bakirtzis, Τα τείχη των βυζαντινών πόλεων: Αισθητική, ιδεολογίες και συμβολισμοί, in: *Οι Βυζαντινές πόλεις, 8ος-15ος αιώνας. Προοπτικές της έρευνας και νέες ερμηνευτικές προσεγγίσεις*, ed. T. Kiousopoulou, Rethymno 2012, 139-158.

95. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 60.20-29.

wall and the author mentions the works that had to be done to facilitate the access of men and carriages over the ravines surrounding the city[96]. However, the urban space was continually growing, and the fortified enclosure had to be expanded once more. Bessarion describes at some length the walling of a city district situated to the west of the old walls, the building of new gates and the erection of towers[97].

The image of a booming city that continues to expand well beyond even its new circuit wall is sketched in the following paragraphs. The author notes that most of Trebizond's population has overflowed outside the walls on either side, and areas of housing extend farther than the eye can see, forming suburbs to both east and west that have brought fame to the city. This zone is presented as a liminal space located in between the city and the surrounding countryside; it combines urban and rural features in a harmonious way in the manner of a beautiful artifact. The houses in the suburbs are surrounded by meadows and gardens full of fruit-bearing and olive trees, greatly delighting travelers on their way out of Trebizond, almost making them forget about the road ahead and captivating them with their beauty[98].

The market is also located in this intermediate area, in between an "inside" walled urban space and an "outside" world. The author describes it at length as a trading hub on the city's eastern side, stretching away as far as the eye can see from the walls. He gives a colorful picture of its economic life,

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96. Ibid., 60.33-61.10.

97. Ibid., 61.19-35. The lower city walls were erected some time after the failed Seljuk attack in 1222/3, and were later expanded to the west by Alexios II (1282-1330) in 1324. On the walls of Trebizond and the intramural sections of the city, see: Bryer – Winfield, *The Byzantine Monuments* [as in n.4], v. 1, 183-184, 186-194, and figs. 42-44.

98. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 62.1-13. Despite Bessarion's depiction of Trebizond as a thriving and populous urban center, it seems that its population in the fifteenth century ranged somewhere between just 4,000 and perhaps 7,000 inhabitants. The first number is given by Pedro Tafur, who visited the city in 1438. The second one can be approximately calculated from the data of an Ottoman census register in 1486, where the size of the non-Muslim population is around 5,000 people. However, one third of Trebizond's inhabitants had been deported to Constantinople after the Ottoman conquest of the city in 1461, so the total population in the middle of the fifteenth century probably amounted to around 7,000 people. See: Bryer – Winfield, *The Byzantine Monuments*, v. 1, 179-180; K. Moustakas, Μεθοδολογικά ζητήματα στην προσέγγιση των πληθυσμιακών μεγεθών της υστεροβυζαντινής πόλης, in: *Οι Βυζαντινές πόλεις* [as in n.94], 225-251, at 248.

with artisans working in numerous workshops, traders buying and selling goods from all over the world, and native and foreign people teeming in the market every day and hour. The crowd that converges there is made up of foreign traders, both newcomers and people who have settled permanently in Trebizond, and locals. Bessarion concludes by arguing that the whole area of the marketplace is not inferior to anything from a thriving city in its own right, due to the large number of people congregating there, its location, and its size[99].

The market is portrayed in a similar way in the section of the work concerning the geographical location of Trebizond, where it is presented as the main link, along with the harbors, between the city and the outside world. Bessarion notes that if one wants to know about what is happening around the world, one can just visit the market area and ask the buyers there. At the same time, one can find goods from many different countries, both of high quality and in large quantities. More Median and Egyptian fabrics, Serian silk threads and Sinese baskets, and Cilician materials can be found in Trebizond than in their places of origin. One could also see products from the lands around the Phasis and Don rivers, as well as goods that cannot be found anywhere else on earth[100]. Every day many people come and go from the market, some by sea on boats and others by land on foot, as if there were a holy feast or a festival. The sea is always covered with merchant vessels mooring or setting sail, so that it almost seems like a single ship with its sails bulging out and billowing. The land also teems with people and pack animals, as merchants come and go, bringing with them all sorts of goods. Some of them are necessary and essential for human life, while others are luxurious items that indicate the good fortune and prosperity of the cities[101].

The description of the city's harbors emphasizes their role as gates that provided access to overseas territories. Bessarion praises in a paragraph the

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99. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 62.13-63.5. The marketplace was a square located near the Daphnous harbor in the eastern extramural district of Trebizond. It seems that many commercial activities also took place along the road that connected the walled section of the city with this area. See: Bryer –Winfield, *The Byzantine Monuments*, v. 1, 183, 198.

100. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 37.3 -10. The terms "Serian" and "Sinese" refer to goods from China. See: Kennedy, *Two works*, 257.

101. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 37.14-24.

choice of the first settlers to found the city between two harbors at an almost equal distance from the *ἀκρόπολις*. Now, Trebizond has expanded and covered the entire area between them, and the seashore appears to be one continuous dockside running along one whole side of the city[102]. This close relation with the sea has resulted in a continuous mingling and interaction with all other peoples. The author notes that "there are no cities or minds of men about which we do not know"[103]. The Trapezuntines become wiser and better by gathering the best things from everywhere, keeping what is beneficial and trading in every kind of knowledge[104]. Bessarion concludes that everyone would agree that a city can be wealthy and worthy of praise only if it interacts with as many people as possible[105].

The role of the merchants that arrive at the city by sea is particularly commended as they are presented as adventurous and well-informed individuals. The author closely relates their activities with the acquisition of knowledge through experience and finally with virtue itself. He notes that the acquisition of great knowledge comes from wealth of experience since seeing contributes to knowledge[106]. One must overcome many obstacles and learn from one's mistakes in order to attain virtue and be praised or admired for one's personal worth. After all, knowledge and the ability to learn constitute the best part of virtue[107].

This special reference to the merchants arriving by sea as conveyors of information and knowledge complement the image of the market and the ports as city entrances that linked the urban space with overseas territories, being places for the circulation not only of goods but also of ideas and new practices. Throughout the whole text, Bessarion sketches a vivid, idyllic and particularly homogenous picture of the city's eastern commercial district with no tensions and rivalries between different groups and authorities. However, in reality this urban district witnessed a dynamic, complex

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102. Ibid., 34.25-35.7.

103. Ibid., 35.7- 9: ... *ἄστεά τε καὶ νόον ἀνθρώπων οὐκ ἔστιν ὧν τινων οὐ γινώσκοντες...* This is a reference to Homer's *Odyssey*. See: Kennedy, *Two works*, 256.

104. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 35.9 - 13.

105. Ibid., 35.22-24.

106. Ibid., 35.26-27: ... *τό τε πολλὰ μαθεῖν ἐκ τοῦ πολλὰ παθεῖν περιγίνεται καὶ τὸ ἰδεῖν τῷ εἰδέναι συμβάλλεται.*

107. Ibid., 35.27-31.

interaction between the royal power, the local and foreign merchants and the city-states of Venice and Genoa, who were primarily interested in Trebizond as an important port for their long-distance trade. The relations with Venice and Genoa in particular passed through several phases, ranging from harmonious cooperation, disputes about the amount of taxes due and occasional interruptions of contacts to armed conflicts[108]. The Italians had their own quarters in the city's eastern suburb, which comprised churches, public buildings, docks and towers. The urban space in that area was constantly changing as plots were conveyed by the emperor only to be later confiscated or exchanged for other sites, buildings were erected and then abandoned or destroyed, and fortifications were built[109]. Bessarion mainly aims at highlighting the eastern district as a meeting point between the city and the rest of the world and not at exploring the complex processes determining its form.

Apart from the walls, the market and the harbors, the royal palace complex is described in detail, being as it is a major landmark in the urban space. The author notes that it has been built on the ἀκρόπολις and stands out from everything else due to the strength of its walls, the distinctiveness of its construction, its size and its beauty. Therefore, the palace is no less than an ἀκρόπολις in its own right[110]. Then Bessarion goes on to describe its circuit wall, its gates and towers, thereby stressing the image of the whole complex as a separate citadel[111]. The architectural features of the main building are briefly outlined and the narrator comments on the beauty and functionality of its vestibules, main and secondary halls, and balconies[112].

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108. On the relations with Venice and Genoa, see in detail: KARPOV, Ἱστορία, 261-294, 312-344.

109. In the fifteenth century the Genoese were settled around Λεοντόκαστρον on the most easterly promontory of Trebizond before Daphnous harbor. See: BRYER –WINFIELD, *The Byzantine Monuments*, v. 1, 197-198; KARPOV, Ἱστορία, 344-345. The Venetian settlement was also fortified and was probably located on a headland on the north-eastern coast, by the monastery of St. Gregory of Nyssa. See: BRYER –WINFIELD, *The Byzantine Monuments*, v. 1, 202-203; KARPOV, Ἱστορία, 294-296.

110. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 63.15-17.

111. Ibid., 63.18-30.

112. Ibid., 63.30-64.6.

Special emphasis is given to three more adjacent structures which are portrayed as beautiful artifacts. The first one was located opposite the central building of the complex, probably to the right of the southern main entrance. Its floor was paved entirely with white marble, its ceiling shone with gold and its walls had been painted with a variety of colors and decorated with magnificent paintings. The entire vault was full of painted stars that cast their light in imitation of the night sky. Around the walls, there were also portraits of all the emperors that had ruled over Trebizond, together with scenes of victorious battles between the city and those who had attacked it, only to later acknowledge that they had merely turned upon themselves[113].

Beyond this building and close to the highest point of the citadel, Bessarion describes another royal circular structure made entirely of white marble up to its pyramidal roof which was supported by four columns. Its external walls formed a kind of grid that completely separated the emperors from their subjects. It seems that this place was primarily used by the kings to perform their administrative tasks and interact with various groups of people. Here they met with their high-ranking officials, conversed with foreign ambassadors, gave general guidelines and received requests[114].

Bessarion completes the description of the palace by mentioning one more impressive edifice located further up on the ἀκρόπολις. It was large and high, with a vaulted roof and surrounded by columns. A staircase led to a hall decorated with paintings, where the emperor gave banquets for his high-ranking officials and the rest of his subjects. On the left side, there were many other rooms, including one with four equal sides containing depictions commemorating the creation of the world and the first man, and then the history of human life on earth[115]. On the right were many corridors,

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113. Ibid., 64.6-15.

114. Ibid., 64.15-21.

115. Bessarion is probably describing a series of frescos narrating the creation of the universe and man and the subsequent fall of Adam and Eve from Paradise. The same story was narrated in reverse in a series of carvings and inscriptions above the entrance to the Hagia Sophia in Trebizond. Reading the images from the left, where the first humans were living on earth, to the right, where God has created Paradise somewhere in the East, guided the viewers towards retracing their steps back to Paradise. According to A. Eastmond, *Art and Identity in Thirteenth Century Byzantium: Hagia Sophia and the Empire of Trebizond*, Aldershot 2004, 61-76, the sculpture encapsulates the political program of the Grand

halls, terraces, chambers and rooms of all sizes separated by colonnades, all constructed with ineffable beauty and proper harmony. A holy church had also been founded there, decorated with beautiful paintings and a few sacred offerings of outstanding beauty. What this church lacked in size, it made up for in beauty[116].

As has already been noted in the recent literature, Bessarion provides the most lengthy description of any late Byzantine palace. His long, detailed and vivid narrative has been extensively used by scholars who have sought to reconstruct the image of Trebizond's citadel at this time. The site is a complex one, with many layers from different epochs, while little material evidence has survived from the late Byzantine period[117]. Bessarion is particularly interested in depicting the architectural setting of the palace complex, presenting it as a magnificent and beautiful artifact. The unrivalled *κάλλος* of the royal authority's seat is perceived as a material reflection of the latter's high quality. As the author comments: "The *βασίλεια* (royal residence/power) is thus built in a way that is too beautiful to describe; only seeing it could do it justice..."[118].

The section of the work dealing with the urban space concludes with a brief reference to Trebizond's churches and holy places[119]. The narrative follows the same motif of praising the beauty of the monuments, the quality

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Komnenoi, being a metaphor for their exile from Constantinople and their hope to return there one day. However, after 1261, the same story could be read in a local context in a quite different way. The Pontos region could also be perceived as a kind of Eden, an idyllic place where the royal dynasty found refuge. Fragments of the murals in the citadel have been identified by Bryer – Winfield, *The Byzantine Monuments*, v. 1, 193, in a bastion.

116. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 64.21-65.4.

117. For a possible reconstruction of the citadel's topography according to the scant surviving evidence and Bessarion's encomium, see in detail: Bryer –Winfield, *The Byzantine Monuments*, v. 1, 184-186, 191-195, fig. 44, v. 2, pls. 120-148b.

118. Bessarion, *Encomium*, 65.5-6: *Οὕτω κάλλιόν τι ἢ εἰπεῖν ἐσκεύασται τὰ βασίλεια καὶ μόνη ταῦτ' ἂν ἀκριβῶς ὄψις κατανοῆσαι...* The literary *τόπος* of the city's beauty is regularly mentioned in the Byzantine rhetorical tradition, associating the experience of urban living with aesthetic pleasure. Bessarion uses the concept mainly in relation to the palace complex and sporadically in the rest of his *encomium*. On the rhetorical uses of the city's *κάλλος* throughout the Byzantine period, see: H. Saradi, The *kallos* of the Byzantine city: The Development of a Rhetorical *Topos* and Historical Reality, *Gesta* 34/1(1995), 37-56.

119. Bessarion, E*ncomium*, 65.9-21.

of their masonry, and their decoration. There is no reference to specific churches or monasteries, nor even to Hagia Sophia, Saint Eugenios or the Panagia Chrysokephalos, which played an important role in the local context, being sites closely associated with the imperial power and the city's identity as a royal capital[120]. Bessarion vaguely notes that some of them were more beautiful than others. However, it is worth noting that the extramural churches are depicted as forming a circle, perhaps implying that they define a God-protected space around the whole area of the city.

Throughout the whole description of the urban space, the author develops the central theme of a city in a phase of rapid economic and population growth. Especially the narration of the continual expansions of the external circuit wall aims at highlighting the image of a booming city, unable to contain its growing population. The palace complex on the ἀκρόπολις and the market area are highlighted as the major urban landmarks, since they are the most important spatial markers of Trebizond's identity. The detailed description of the palace's architectural features aims at promoting the image of a beautiful adornment that embodies the virtue of the royal power which looks after the city from the top of the citadel. On the other hand, the market area with the nearby docks is presented as a place in between the walled city and both the surrounding countryside and the rest of the world. As such, it facilitates the interaction between different people and the flow not only of goods but also of information and knowledge. It functions as a liminal space, especially for people coming in or leaving, linking a local "indoor" urban environment with the "global" trade networks of an "outdoor" world, thus emphasizing the role of Trebizond as a city "at the mid-point of most of Asia".

CONSTRUCTING TREBIZOND'S IDENTITY

Bessarion's ἐγκώμιον cannot be considered a typical late Byzantine ἔκφρασις of a city. A long section of the text narrates in great detail the history of both Trebizond and the ancient cities which were considered as its ancestors; the economic and spatio-cultural relations of the city with its surrounding lands and peoples are thoroughly explored mainly in an

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120. On the role of these churches and monasteries in the imperial rituals, see: EASTMOND, *Art and Identity*, 48-60.

Asian context through the scheme of center and periphery; the city walls and their continual expansions are closely associated with the image of a thriving urban space which continually grows beyond its previous material and symbolic borders; churches and monasteries are briefly and vaguely mentioned, being of minor importance in the author's view. These are all integral parts of Bessarion's narrative strategy to construct a specific political and spatial identity for his own πατρίς.

Trebizond is primarily depicted as a city-state where the kings must look after the common good and endeavor to enjoy the trust of the citizens. This image of an almost self-managing community is grounded on the ideal of the city's political liberty, which is mainly defined as an antonym of foreign tyranny. The whole history of Trebizond is narrated through this interpretive framework in which the city is presented as the bastion of liberty and, more broadly, of the ancient Greek political culture in the middle of an alien, barbaric surrounding world. After all, it is considered a direct descendant of Athens, the archetypical city-state of the γένος.

This focus on the concept of the city-state is quite innovative in the local context, since the political identity of the Megas Komnenos' state was structured around the royal dynasty, and it was grounded on a traditional Byzantine background[121]. Bessarion introduces in Trebizond a well-organized set of ideas, metaphors, and historical analogies related to the cities' political autonomy which had already been often used in the Byzantine political thought in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries[122]. However, he goes on a step further by systematically structuring in his work the imagination and the symbolisms of the whole field of politics around the concept of the "city-state". Thus, he outlines a new political imaginary for the urban elites of a broader Byzantine world alternative to the traditional imperial one that no

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121. On the political ideology and the system of governance of the state, see: KARPOV, Ἱστορία, 183-193.

122. See above notes 1 and 16. For the perception of Constantinople in the fifteenth century as almost a city-state by a few intellectuals and some members of the Byzantine elite, see: T. KIOUSSOPOULOU, Βασιλεύς ή Οικονόμος. Πολιτική Εξουσία και Ιδεολογία πριν την Άλωση, Athens 2007 [= Emperor or Manager? Power and Political Ideology in Byzantium before 1453, transl. by P. MAGDALINO], Geneva 2011]; J. HARRIS, Constantinople as City-State, c.1360-1453, in: Byzantines Latins and Turks in the Eastern Mediterranean World after 1150, ed. J. HARRIS – C. HOLMES – E. RUSSELL, Oxford 2012, 119-140.

longer corresponded to the fragmented political reality of the era.

The spatial features of Trebizond's identity are equally crucial in Bessarion's analysis. He promotes the image of a city favored by its location and mentality of openness to the world and interaction with many peoples and cultures, thereby becoming a center not only of trade but also of knowledge. The royal palace and the market area with the neighboring docks are portrayed as the major landmarks of the urban space. The former embodies the virtue of the royal power while the latter links, as a liminal place, the city with the "global" networks of the era. Especially through this emphasis on the productive spatio-cultural interaction with foreign peoples and lands, Bessarion stresses another important aspect of his view of Trebizond; its dynamic, and not static or inward-looking, nature, which befits a city committed to openness.

Η Κατασκευη Της Εικονας Μιας Πολης - Κρατους
Μεσην αν Φαιην ... του της Ασιας ως Ειπειν Πλειστου
Το *Εγκωμιο* Της Τραπεζουντας Απο Τον Βησσαριωνα

Το άρθρο διερευνά την εικόνα της Τραπεζούντας όπως παρουσιάζεται στην έκφραση του Βησσαρίωνα για την πόλη, εστιάζοντας κυρίως στην πολιτική λειτουργία του κειμένου. Τα δύο πρώτα μέρη επικεντρώνονται στην παρουσίαση της Τραπεζούντας ως πόλης-κράτους και στην αφήγηση του ιστορικού της παρελθόντος. Οι δύο επόμενες ενότητες ασχολούνται αντίστοιχα με την ανάλυση από τον συγγραφέα των σχέσεων της πόλης με τον υπόλοιπο κόσμο και την αφηγηματική αναπαράσταση του αστικού χώρου και των σημείων αναφοράς του. Τέλος, αναδεικνύονται τα χαρακτηριστικά της πολιτικής και χωρικής ταυτότητας που ο Βησσαρίων έχει αναδείξει στο κείμενο.