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### The Pontic Succession in Birmingham: Ruth Juliana Macrides (1949-2019)

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Paul Magdalino

THE PONTIC SUCCESSION IN BIRMINGHAM:  
RUTH JULIANA MACRIDES (1949-2019)

In the late twentieth century, the Hellenism of Pontic Anatolia founded a new intellectual colony in the University of Birmingham. Here, under the benign shadow of the Hellenist George Thomson, Anthony Bryer made his lifelong devotion to the history of the Pontos the impetus for a renaissance of Byzantine studies in the U.K. that is still going strong. None of Bryer's numerous and distinguished students followed him in his enthusiasm for the regional history of the north-eastern corner of the Byzantine world. However, one of his successors at Birmingham who continued to maintain the excellence of its Centre of Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies, was a Byzantinist of pure Pontic descent.

Ruth Juliana Macrides joined the Centre on Bryer's retirement in 1994, first in a job-share with Leslie Brubaker and then in a full position. She became successively Lecturer, Senior Lecturer and Reader, and was at least two years short of retirement, as vibrant and dynamic as ever, when she suffered a massive stroke on St George's Day 2019, passing away four days later on Orthodox Holy Saturday, 27 April. Her achievement as a teacher and scholar will be commemorated elsewhere. Here it is appropriate to ponder the impact of her ancestry, to reflect on the fact that this much loved and sorely missed luminary of British Byzantine studies was born to parents originating in the Black Sea community of Ordu, ancient Kotyora, midway between Trebizond and Samsun.

Ruth's family background was symptomatic of the political and demographic upheavals, as well as the strong social solidarities, that marked the Greek populations of Asia Minor in the first half of the twentieth century. George Lazaros Macrides and Tasoula (Anastasia) *née* Koutropoulou married in Maryland in the aftermath of the Second World War. Their families had been acquainted in the *patrida* when it was part of

the Ottoman Empire, but it was exile that brought them together.

The Macrides family derived their name from the ancestor who established them in Ordu, one Uzunlia (= Tall Ilias) from Argyropolis/Gümüşhane. They were enterprising businessmen, opening the city's only department store as well as one of the first cinemas in the region. The business gave them the means to build a fine, three-story neoclassical house and to send George's uncle, Ilias Macrides, to study at the Great School of the Nation in Constantinople, where he witnessed the Young Turk revolution of 1908. It was Ilias who eventually led the family's relocation to Greece after the turmoil of the First World War and the conflicts that led to the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Before that, he and his brother Lazaros, George's father, had separate adventures in the wake of the brief Russian occupation of the eastern Pontos, which led to severe Ottoman reprisals against the local population.

Ilias followed the retreating Tsarist forces to Russia, where he became caught up in the Revolution and civil war. He served with the medical corps of the Red Army and had a passionate relationship with a nun that marked him for life. He never married, and so it was to his nephews and nieces and their children that he later told his stories of Ordu, Constantinople and Russia from his photographic memory. He was ready to retell them to all who were prepared to listen, as Ruth and I were when we lived in Athens in 1973-1974. The memory was usually so intense that he would break off in tears, saying, "It's in my book". The three volumes of memoirs, neatly handwritten in impeccable *katharevousa*, still await publication.

Meanwhile, Lazaros Macrides and his new bride, Efterpi Kantartzis, were among the lucky ones who managed to scramble aboard one of the Russian warships that anchored off Ordu one day in August 1917. They made their way eastwards across Russia and North America to Efterpi's sister Vasiliki in Brooklyn. A number of Efterpi's relatives had gone to settle in New York and Massachusetts after their conversion by American evangelical missionaries. Lazaros' and Efterpi's son George was thus born a U.S. citizen in Boston. At the end of the war, they decided that it was safe to return to Ordu, but they returned only to be displaced three years later in the exchange of populations. Their transition to their new life in Piraeus was relatively smooth; they were able to bring many

of their possessions, including the film projector from the cinema, and they received compensation in the form of a spacious courtyard house in Drapetsona. George grew up here, but took advantage of his U.S. citizenship to emigrate to Boston at the outbreak of Second World War. He enrolled in the U.S. Navy, fought in the Pacific theatre, and on demobilization trained as a printer.

Ruth's mother Tasoula was the youngest of five children born to Ioannis Koutropoulos and Iouliani *née* Kouthouris. Koutropoulos had a tailoring business, apparently more modest than the Macrides' enterprise, but equally typical of the burgeoning late Ottoman commercial economy, and equally connected with Constantinople, where, according to Tasoula, a relative was the first owner of the Pera Palas Hotel. The family had its full share of dislocation and hardship during and after the Great War – Tasoula was born in internal exile at Fatsa – but they did not leave the Pontos until the exchange of populations. In Greece, they dispersed to Lefkas, Xanthi, Katerini and, eventually, Athens. After the Second World War, while her elder siblings found jobs and marriages in Greece, Tasoula was despatched to America, to the care of her maternal uncle George Kouthouris in Philadelphia. It was he who introduced her to George Macrides, and his wife Ruth, who was of Irish-German descent, was the inspiration for the very untraditional name with which the couple baptised their first child, born on 1 October 1949.

Ruth was ambivalent in her attitude to both her American and her Greek identities. Her education at Boston Girls' Latin School and Barnard-Columbia, New York, where she majored in Ancient Greek and art history, gave her the intellectual tools to resent what she saw as the unthinking Americanization of her family. She was equally unmoved by Hellenic nationalism, including the Pontic variant. She chose King's College London for postgraduate study, and made her home and career in the U.K., taking British citizenship in 2017. Her years in Washington at Dumbarton Oaks (1974-1977) and in Frankfurt, at the Max-Planck Institut für Europäische Rechtsgeschichte (1980-1981) were more decisive for her intellectual development than the year we lived in Athens (1973-1974).

Yet Ruth found strength and support in her extensive but close-knit family network, in both Greece and the U.S., which for two generations did not marry outside the Pontic community in exile. Her roots in this

community, and its links to Constantinople, helped to nudge her in the direction of Byzantium. Her Pontic origins endeared her to Bryer when they met at Dumbarton Oaks in 1976; thus she gave her first conference paper at his 1978 spring symposium on “The Byzantine Black Sea”. The paper, “What’s in the name Megas Komnenos?”, which appeared in *Archeion Pontou*, was her first publication.

There was a Pontic connection, too, in the bond that Ruth formed at Dumbarton Oaks with the academic couple who came closest to being our role models. Nicolas Oikonomides was inducted into Byzantine studies by the Pontic interests of his high-school mentor, Odysseus Lampsidis. His wife, the Ottomanist Elizabeth Zachariadou, came from a family of Cappadocian Karamanlides who had settled in Samsun.

When barely into her PhD, Ruth could not wait to visit Istanbul, so we went there from Athens in the foggy, smoky chill of New Year 1974, armed with her notes from recent publications on the Byzantine churches of Constantinople. She was to return many times. The Pontos itself had to wait until 1983, when we travelled by bus from Bodrum to Trabzon, taking in Konya, Ankara and Ordu. Here we had no idea what to look for. We were better prepared when we returned with Tasoula, aged 86, in June 2006. We showed her Trebizond and the monastery of Soumela before moving on to Ordu for the night. We tried to stay at the Macrides mansion, now a boutique hotel, but this was closed for renovation. The next morning, we walked around the Ipapanti neighbourhood looking for the Koutropoulos house. We failed to locate it for certain, but this was not for want of directions from Tasoula, who remembered hearing fairly precise descriptions of what it looked like and where it lay in relation to the church of the Ipapanti.

We travelled on to Amasya via Fatsa, Tasoula’s birthplace, and skirting Niksar (Neocaesarea) where her mother and siblings had been exiled in 1917-1919. We flew out of Samsun, where Kemal Atatürk had landed on 19 May 1919, just over three months before Tasoula was born, thus initiating the final, brutal chapter in the history of Pontic Hellenism, and triggering the chain of events that would lead to Ruth’s birth in Boston just over thirty years later, on 1 October 1949.