



Summary :

The case of John Choiboskos is both unusual and interesting. He lived in the first decade of the 14th century. He was a man of humble origin, a warrior and adventurer, who fought against the Turkish tribes at head of military troupes. The Byzantines initially imprisoned him on suspicion, while he had been also imprisoned by the Turks. Later, his troupes involved in looting.

Other Names

Matzoukatos

Date and Place of Birth

second half of the 13th c.

Date and Place of Death

14th c.

Main Role

military official

1. Biographical information

The little that is known about John Choiboskos is fragmentary information that have survived in the historical work *Syngraphikai Historiai* (Συγγραφικαί Ιστορίαι) by [George Pachymeres](#). The Byzantine historian mentions that John was a youth of Bulgarian descent whose name was Matzoukatos¹ and who was also called Choiboskos² because of his prior occupation.

Around 1303³ John assembled a battalion of around three hundred men and volunteered to serve under co-emperor [Michael IX Palaiologos](#) in the war against the Muslims in [Asia Minor](#), although the battalion consisted of men without any military experience. This somewhat unexpected proposal caused the suspicions of the Byzantine emperor and his advisors; not out of fear for the possible death of the members of the inexperienced men but mostly out of concern for the turmoil that the appearance of a group of armed peasants could arise among the Byzantine rural population.⁴ Therefore, as a precaution, John Choiboskos was arrested and put in prison for nine months.

2. Activity

2.1. Activity in Asia Minor

John Choiboskos however managed to escape and he even made use of same sort of ecclesiastical immunity to stay free. Moreover, instead of lose his courage to his arrest, he went on to organize a new battalion, gathering refugees from Asia Minor. It is clear that he was an unusual individual, combining the temperament of a peasant, of a warrior and an adventurer.

Later, as leader of his troupes, he headed to Asia Minor where he fought against the Ottomans. These conflicts took place mainly in the area around the Scamander River. After its initial success however, Choiboskos' battalion disbanded and he himself was imprisoned. For a second time in a short period, he lost his freedom. But it seems that this did not daunt him either.



2.2. Activity in the area of Thessaloniki

About Choiroboskos' subsequent fortune, Pachymeres offers two versions: according to the first he was murdered, while according to the second, which the Byzantine historian considers more likely, John Choiroboskos managed to escape from captivity and returned to the Balkans.

For a second time he offered his services to the emperor Michael IX, visiting him at his camp. This time the situation was different: the Empire facing the threat of the raids of the **Catalan** mercenaries who had sided with the Muslims, the emperor accepted Choiroboskos' offer.

John was honoured with the title of **sebastos**, which during the late Byzantine period was given to the commanders of foreign mercenaries,⁵ and in this way he entered into the service of the Byzantine army. With permission from the emperor he assembled a battalion of a thousand men to fight against the Ottomans, and carried out his operations in the area of Thessaloniki.

These events took place around 1307 and definitely not before this date. It appears however that Choiroboskos' battalion very quickly became a gang which terrorized the outskirts of the second largest Byzantine city.⁶ At this point the traces of John Choiroboskos are lost and Pachymeres provides no more information about him.

1. The family name Matzoukatos is not unknown in late Byzantium. See *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit*, 7 (Wien 1985), no. 17276-17279, p. 148.

2. We know of a Byzantine scholar from the early 9th century by the name of George Choiroboskos, while from the late Byzantine period survives information about a certain foreigner, Drazos Choiroboskos from Macedonia (1320), see *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit*, 7 (Wien 1985), no. 30875, p. 222.

3. During this period Michael IX was in Asia Minor (spring of 1302 – January 1304). See *Georges Pachymères Relations Historiques*, A. Failler (ed.), IV (Paris 1999), pp. 484-485, note 55.

4. Божилов И., *Българите във Византийската империя* (София 1995) [Božilov, I., *Bългарite vŭn Vizantijskata imperija*, Sofia 1995], no. 449, p. 355.

5. Ahrweiler, H., «Le sébaste chef de groupes ethniques» in *Polychronion. Festschrift F. Dölger* (Heidelberg 1966), pp. 34-38.

6. Laiou, A., *Constantinople and the Latins. The Foreign Policy of Andronicus II, 1282-1328* (Cambridge Mass. 1972), p. 192.

Bibliography :



Bartusis M.C., *The Late Byzantine Army. Arms and Society 1204-1453*, Philadelphia 1992



Moravcsik G., *Byzantinoturcica II: Sprachreste der Turkvölker in den byzantinischen Quellen*, 2nd ed., Berlin 1958, Berliner Byzantinische Arbeiten, no 11



	Λαίου Α.Ε. , <i>Constantinople and the Latins. The Foreign Policy of Andronicus II, 1282-1328</i> , Cambridge Mass. 1972, Harvard Historical Studies 88
	Божилев И. , <i>Българите във Византийската империя</i> , София 1995
	Божилев И. , "Les Bulgares dans la préséance et dans l'administration byzantine", <i>Études balkaniques</i> , 14, 1978, 112-120
	Ahrweiler H. , "Le sébaste chef de groupes ethniques", Wirth P., <i>Polychronion. Festschrift für Franz Dölger zum 75. Geburtstag</i> , Heidelberg 1966, 34-38
	Oikonomides N. , "A propos des armées des premiers Paléologues et des compagnies de soldats", <i>Travaux et Mémoires</i> , 8, 1981, 353-371
	Γεώργιος Παχυμέρης , <i>Συγγραφικαί Ιστορίαι</i> , Failler, A. (ed.), <i>Georges Pachymérés. Relations historiques, III-IV</i> , Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae. Series Parisiensis 24.3-4, Paris 1999

Glossary :

	Catalan Company, the (almugavares, compagna) A group of fully-armed and highly-trained Catalans mercenary warriors, who numbered a few thousand. In 1303 they came to the assistance of Byzantium against the Turks, but soon they turned against the Empire and took to large-scale looting. They conquered the Burgundian duchy of Athens, after the battle of Orchomenos in Copais, in 1311.
	sebastos ("venerable") Title of honour created by Constantine IX the Monomachos in the middle of the 11th century. Originated from the translation of the imperial adjective augustus. This title was given successively to the two mistresses of the emperor.

Sources

Failler, A. (ed.), *Georges Pachymérés. Relations historiques, IV* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae. Series Parisiensis 24.4, Paris, 1999).

Quotations

George Pachymeres' reference to John Choïroboskos:

Ἐν τούτῳ καί τις νεανίας τὸ γένος Βούλγαρος, Χοιροβοσκὸς τούπικλην, ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐπιτηδεύματος οἶμαι τοῦ πάλαι, Ἰωάννης, πολέμοις τισὶν ἐνδιατρίψας κατὰ Μυσίαν, ὡς ἰσχυρίζετο, ἀκούων τὰ κατ' ἀνατολήν δρώμενα [...] ἀναλαμβάνει θάρρος, καὶ εἰς τριακοσίους τῷ ποσῷ προσεταιριζόμενος, τοξοφόρους καὶ κορυνήτας τοὺς πλείστους, τὸ μὲν πρῶτον πρὸς τὴν θαλάσση γενόμενος ἠβούλετο διαπεραιούσθαι, ἔτι κατ' ἀνατολήν τοῦ βασιλέως διάγοντος Μιχαήλ...

A. Failler (ed.), *Georges Pachymérés. Relations historiques, IV* (Paris 1999), p. 442.4-13.

John Choïroboskos escapes from the Ottomans and adresses himself for a second time to Michael IX:

[...] ὕστερον δ' ἀποδράς ἐκείθεν πρὸς δύσιν κάτεισι, καὶ τῷ Μιχαήλ προσελθὼν τιμὴν λαβὼν ἐπὶ Βουλγάροις τῆς σεβαστότητος, ἐπεὶ ἀνόνητα ὄσα κατὰ Τούρκων καὶ Ἀμογαβάρων Ῥωμαῖοι ὤρων ποιεῖν, ἐκχώρησιν αὐτὸς λαβὼν παρὰ βασιλέως, περὶ που δὴ καὶ χιλίους συνάξας, πεζὸς σὺν πεζοῖς ἐπέχρα τοῖς Πέρσαις, καὶ κακῶς ἔδρα περὶ τὰ κατὰ τὴν Θεσσαλονίκην...

A. Failler (ed.), *Georges Pachymérés. Relations historiques, IV* (Paris 1999), p. 444.8-14.



Chronological Table

1303: John Choïroboskos enters the service of Michael IX, falls in disgrace and is imprisoned

1304: He participates in military operations in Asia Minor

after 1307: He fights against the Ottomans in the area of Thessalonike