

*Digenes Akritas. The Two-Blood Border Lord. The Grottaferrata Version.* Translated with an Introduction and Notes by D. B. Hull. Athens, Ohio, Ohio University Press, 1972. Pp. XLVIII+148.

There is no doubt that Mr. Hull has produced a useful book which shall help non-Greek-speaking readers to become acquainted with one of the most important works in Byzantine literature. The book is divided into three parts: Introduction, Translation and Notes.

In the introduction, which is brief for such a complicated and much discussed subject as the romance of Digenis Akritas, the author tries to supply readers with some essential information in order to eliminate the many difficulties presented by the medieval Greek text. Mr. Hull is not only an amateur with a limited view of Byzantine literature he is also preoccupied with the wrong impression that Byzantine literature is a "Sahara filled with dry ecclesiastical histories and hairsplitting arguments on dogma" (p. IX). I am tempted to ask Mr. Hull whether he is familiar with the medieval literature of Western Europe and whether he finds it better or different from the literary production of Byzantium. At all events it becomes obvious from his introduction that he lacks the necessary background which shall enable him to see his subject in its right perspective and to appreciate its function within Byzantine literature — I should add, within Byzantine society.

The introduction is not free of inaccuracies, misunderstandings and mistakes. The author seems, for instance, to believe that changes in pronunciation and grammar of Hellenistic koine are due "to the influence of the native tongues of the barbarians" (p. XX), that after the loss of ancient prosody Greek literature established a new metrical system based on the stressed syllables only in the VIIth and VIIIth century (p. XXI), that the new form of writing developed from the speech of peasants (p. XXI), that political verse whose origin is still obscure goes back to classical iambic tetrameter catalectic (p. XXIX) etc. Furthermore he purports that Digenis Akritas, is not an epic, yet he fails to associate it with the other Byzantine love romances (p. XXV) and he dates it in the XIth century though it is well known that love is absent from all Byzantine literature from VIth (Agathias' cycle) to XIIth (the romances of the Comnenian age) century; Hull observes that Digenis Akritas is divided into two parts, the first part referring to Emir, Digenis' father, and the second to Digenis himself, but he suspects "that originally there was only one story." Modern scholarship accepts, however, that the poem indeed consists of two separate works, the Epic of the Emir and the Romance of Digenis. The former has an epic atmosphere, offers some ground for approximate dating (XIth

century) and is believed to have originated among the Arab tribes who were allies of the Byzantine emperor, whereas the latter is a mere love romance that was built upon the pattern of the Emir, possibly conceived as its continuation and written in a later date (XII-XIIIth century) (see H.-G. Beck, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Volksliteratur*, Munich 1971, p. 96).

All that Mr. Hull says about oral composition and transmission is interesting and valuable. So far popular medieval Greek poetry has not been studied from this point of view, perhaps because modern Greek scholars are hesitant or unprepared to see things from a new perspective and to move away from the traditional methods of establishing and editing a text. Yet I personally believe that a thorough study of the formulas of oral composition and transmission offers the key for a reappraisal of all the problems related to popular Byzantine literature. It is only in our own days that scholars (see M. and E. Jeffreys, "Imberios and Margarona, the Manuscripts, Sources and the Edition of a Byzantine Verse Romance", *Byzantion* 41, 1971, 122 ff.) begin to employ new methods in their work and this may soon lead to a total revision of all things we know about the way popular Byzantine texts were composed and circulated, consequently to a revision of our methods of editing and commenting upon these texts. The translation of *Digenis Akritas* based on the Grottaferrata version occupies pp. 3-134. Mr. Hull has found Mavrogordato's literal translation in five stress lines unsatisfactory and has tried to replace it with a new literary translation in blank verse. Yet in many cases one gets the impression that Mr. Hull is doing little more than polishing Mavrogordato's translation by changing a word, by omitting or adding another and by making a loose verse more compact (cf. the opening lines of Mavrogordato's translation, p. 67 f. and those of Mr. Hull's translation, p. 33f.).

The notes are helpful to the reader but limited to what is most essential. Surprisingly enough in the "works consulted," where one might expect some select bibliography on the *Digenis'* romance, the author lists some books, very few books indeed, almost irrelevant to his subject.

It is certain that Mr. Hull's aim was noble and praiseworthy but now is the moment for a critic to evaluate the importance, the reliability and the helpfulness of his book. I feel deeply sorry to say that Mr. Hull fell short and dealt with a subject that was beyond his range of activity.