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Fascicolo 17. Marzo 2024
Storia Militare Antica

a cura di
MARCO BETTALLI ED ELENA FRANCHI



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Out of the East, Darkness

Ex Oriente Tenebrae: Byzantine presence in video games
(A chapter in contemporary Orientalism)

By BIHTER SABANOGLU

Drawing inspiration from the exhibition curated by Emir Alışık of Istanbul Research Institute, titled *What Byzantinism Is This in Istanbul!*¹ and held at the Pera Museum from November 23, 2021 to March, 13, 2022, which showcased Byzantine-themed video games and various instances of Byzantine influence in popular culture, I delve into the representation of Byzantine presence in *Assassin's Creed* and *Civilization V*.



Theodora from the game Civilization V
What Byzantinism is this in Istanbul! exhibition in Istanbul, Pera Museum

1 “What Byzantinism Is This in Istanbul!” borrows its title from Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu’s novel *Panorama I-II* (1953–1954), where his protagonist exclaims these lines, being frustrated with postwar Turkish society. <https://www.peramuseum.org/exhibition/what-byzantinism-is-this-in-istanbul/1280>

In the early months of 2011, eagerly anticipating the new *Assassin's Creed*, I scoured gaming forums and Reddit threads for any tidbits of information about the game. The thrill was palpable when I discovered that the fourth installment, *Revelations*, would transport players to 16th-century Istanbul. Upon the game's release in December, I forsook all my pending tasks and succumbed to a trance that endured for weeks. I meandered aimlessly through the virtual streets of the city segmented into four main axes – Constantinople, Beyazit, Topkapı, and Galata – I explored every corner from Gül Mosque to the Grand Bazaar. With a rope securely fastened around my waist, I jumped from roof to roof in relentless pursuit of the keys to the library bequeathed by my ancestors. *Assassin's Creed*, centered on the struggle between the power-hungry autocratic Templars seeking to subjugate humanity and the assassins defending his free will and honor, features in this latest installment a flirtatious and resourceful Florentine nobleman, Ezio Auditore, along with a witty and charismatic but juvenile Suleiman the Magnificent, Piri Reis, portrayed as a bomb expert prepared to utilize his know-how for the benefit of assassins, the brutal and rebellious Shakhkulu, and the formidable Manuel Palaiologos, the last heir of the deposed Byzantine dynasty.

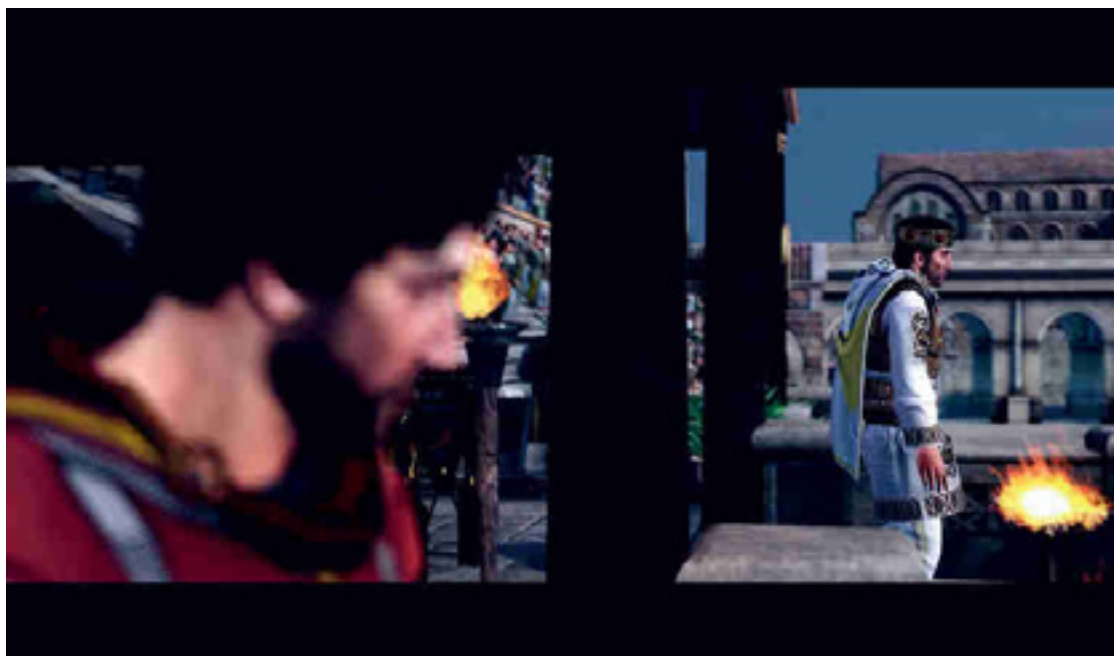


Fig. 2. Attila, *What Byzantinism is this in Istanbul!* exhibition, Pera Museum

Although not set in the Byzantine Empire, the narrative, abundant with numerous Byzantine references, commences with Ezio's arrival in May 1511 to an Istanbul enveloped in fog, adorned with domes, minarets, and palm trees, and thus begins to fulfill its promise of a potpourri of orientalism from the very first moment Konstantiniyye graces the screen. Perusing his leather-bound book on the deck of the sailboat as it approaches Galata, Ezio looks to Suleiman, whose identity he has yet to discover, observes him examining the astrolabe held toward the sun, and remarks, "A magnificent sight!". In response, Suleiman comments, "It is a work in progress", and the duo promptly engages in delving into the perennial theme that has always captivated travelers. As Ezio remarks "No city in Europa has a skyline quite like this", a half-offended Suleiman responds, "Well to be precise, that is Europa" gesturing towards one section of the city, and proceeds to point at the other, remarking, "That is Asia."



Fig. 3. Ezio Auditore & Suleiman the Magnificent, screenshot from the Assassin's Creed game. In my view, the astrolabe that occupies Suleiman in the opening might have been inspired by a real 1645/55 astrolabe present (No. 56821) in the Science Museum Group's collection.

Exploring the East-West dichotomy even before setting foot in Istanbul, the protagonists subject the concepts of “conquest” and “fall” to a semiotic analysis, causing players to overlook errors like the incorrect count of minarets on Hagia Sophia and the peculiarities of Istanbul’s vegetation. Sultan Suleiman expresses unease over Ezio’s use of the phrase “the fall of Constantinople”, and counters with “I believe you mean ‘the conquest of Konstantiniyye’?”, thereby introducing the enduring political issue of the city’s naming. Despite this minor disagreement, these two tolerant men conclude the discussion by mutually acknowledging that the mentioned concepts are intricately tied to the narrator’s identity and lack an internal meaning.

In the spirit of the travelers, artists, and adventurers who would visit the city Ezio responds to inquiries about his journey to Istanbul by expressing that he came seeking “inspiration”. As the game progresses, we realize that this ambiguous concept translates into actions such as committing homicide, engaging in an affair with a foreign woman, and becoming entangled in Eastern intrigues. Certainly, this is natural as Constantinople embodies what Bakhtin terms the carnivalesque; there, norms are inverted, and principles are slippery. Ezio indeed becomes ensnared in a Byzantine intrigue, as the treacherous triumvirate, consisting of the janissary lord Tarik Barleti, Turkmen Shahkulu and Manuel Palaiologos, collaborate with the malevolent Templars, to orchestrate an attack against the Ottoman throne. The troops of Shahkulu, who is depicted as an executioner devoid of empathy and the Templars linger somewhat in the background, while the game presents the Byzantines and the janissaries as the true allies. The coalition formed by these two factions not only remains evident in their mentality but is also reflected in their appearance.

The attire worn by the janissaries in the game mirrors the Western collective consciousness; they have a “börk” adorning the head, wear loose trousers on the legs, and carry a thick belt around the waist with a yataghan, the notorious Ottoman saber, tucked in. However, there is a noticeable absence; the long, magnificent mustache fetishized by Europeans is missing, substituted by an unusual mask that combines elements of Sparta and Venice. The excessive fetishization of the Oriental mustache by Westerners can indeed be traced in the firsthand account of D’Aubignosc, a French soldier who visited the Ottoman Empire to train the soldiers tasked with replacing the abolished janissary corps following

Mahmud II's reforms.² In his book titled *La Turquie Nouvelle jugée au point où l'ont amenée les réformes du sultan Mahmoud* (The New Turkey judged at the point reached by the reforms of Sultan Mahmud), D'Aubignosc shared his observations devoting an entire chapter to the disappearance of the janissaries' mustache. He elaborated on how these mustaches were meticulously grown and maintained by the strong and imposing men, lamenting for pages about the loss of this symbol of masculinity due to Mahmud II's reforms aimed at presenting his new troops with a revitalized image.

If we revisit the attire of the Janissaries in *Assassin's Creed*, the hybrid mask with a Spartan undertone worn on their faces for anonymity not only imparts a Hellenistic touch, aligning them with Greek soldiers but also, with their pointed chins and noses, evokes thoughts John VIII Palaiologos. An engraving, entitled *El Gran Turco*, attributed to Antonio del Pollaiuolo, which presents a fantastical depiction of Mehmet the Conqueror with dragon-themed headgear, found inspiration in John VIII Palaiologos, thereby amalgamating Ottoman and Byzantine elements in a visual.³ In a parallel manner, *Assassin's Creed* also merged these two civilizations in the Janissaries' attire, marked by the hat known as "börk" and the iron mask reminiscent of Spartan design.

As for Manuel Palaiologos, to whom the Janissary Agha Tariq supplies arms and ammunition, he embodies all the vices traditionally associated with Byzantium. Representing the alleged Byzantine corruption and opulence, he is so overweight to the extent that his purple kaftan cannot conceal it, he exudes extravagance by adorning a ring of various colors on each finger and displays cruelty without regard for the sacrifice of women and children. He stands thus in stark contrast to the athletic, humble, and conscientious Prince Suleiman. The janissaries, in their turn, execute secret plans with Manuel Palaiologos, eliciting public disapproval through their arrogance, confiscating the possessions of impoverished merchants, and openly expressing their contempt for the Ottoman people by branding them as parasites. In the middle of the game, a riot erupts as a vendor, having lost his fruits to the janissaries, ignites a torch. The crowd storms

2 L. P. B. D'Aubignosc, *La Turquie nouvelle jugée au point où l'ont amenée les réformes du sultan Mahmoud, Volume 1* (Paris: Delloye, 1839), 269-276.

3 For a detailed discussion, please refer to Victor Stoichita's lecture held at Collège de France, titled "Gentile Bellini: un peintre chez les 'Turcs'".



Fig. 4 (a). *El Gran Turco*, ca 1470 (Topkapi Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi Hazine 2153 yaprak 144). According to Nancy Ewart (on her Pinterest page) «The name El Gran Turco, the epitaph given to the Sultan, helps to identify this engraving as Mehmet II, since it is not a real likeness, upon closer inspection, scholars agree that the Sultan's features are probably recalling (b) Pisanello's medal of John VIII Palaiologos (1438)», I esemplare del Bargello, Firenze. Photo Saiko 2014, CC SA 3.0 Unported (Wikimedia Commons). [Editor's note].

the janissary quarry, shouting “sons of donkeys,” and the fusion of the Byzantines and the janissaries, vying in cunning, is fully realized in collective consciousness when the crowd exclaims, “You are even worse than the Byzantines, traitors!”.

However, the resolution of the game's narrative takes an unexpected turn; it becomes evident that the janissaries, demonized due to Mahmud II's political maneuvers and even rebranded as bloodthirsty and brutal entities, returning to haunt the people in the guise of vampires/witches,⁴ could have been ordinary members of the Ottoman Empire all along, merely seeking to earn a living through small-scale commerce. We then realize with astonishment that the Janissary Agha Tariq never betrayed the Ottoman Sultan. He was in fact on a covert mission to eliminate Manuel, intending to thwart the Byzantine enemy by persuading him that they were allies. Tarik, in his agony, as he succumbs in Ezio's arms, even whis-

4 Edhem Eldem, “Yeniçeri Taşları Ve Tarih Üzerine”, *Toplumsal Tarih*, no. 188, 2009.

pers “For God’s sake, protect my homeland”. In that moment, we are grateful for the relief, realizing that *Assassin’s Creed* also challenges the “decline discourse” associated with janissaries, as well as the “purity-corruption paradigm that posits a pure version of Ottoman institutions in a presumed state of original sturdiness versus their later corrupt versions,”⁵ as expressed by the Turkish historian Cemal Kafadar, who extensively studied the subject. There is no abrupt turning point when the virtuous janissaries suddenly become corrupted by involvement in commercial-productive activities. In both the Ottoman period and the game, the janissaries do not constitute a homogenous entity, not all of them are traitors, not all rebel against the state, and not all are tainted by corruption. In the game’s finale, the unjust murder of the janissary lord Tarik is counterbalanced by the executions of Manuel and Shahkulu, and *Assassin’s Creed: Revelations* ends with the consolidation of the Ottoman rule.

Assassin’s Creed was certainly not the first game to explore the Byzantines. In 1991, *Medieval Lords: Soldier Kings of Europe* introduced the iconic Byzantine purple to the gaming world, and in 1999 *Age of Empires II* added Latin-speaking Eastern Romans to its gameplay scheme.⁶ *Crusader Kings II: Legacy of Rome*, launched in 2012, also incorporated Byzantine elements; acquiring the Byzantine package granted players access to innovative torture methods such as “castration” and “blinding”, cleverly playing on the notion that evil rising from the East is always a bit more sinister.

In 2011, in Sid Meier’s renowned game, *Civilization V*, Byzantine Empress Theodora took on the role of one of the leaders. The *Civilization* series is a game rooted in a linear progressive historical approach, where players endeavor to advance their civilization from humble beginnings to a vast empire through the incorporation of technological, intellectual, and cultural sophistication as well as military, diplomatic, and economic prowess. In its core principles, the game aligns with the 4X order in gaming terminology: Exploration, expansion, exploitation, extermination.⁷ *Civilization V*, featuring Theodora in a prominent role,

5 Cemal Kafadar, “On the Purity and Corruption of the Janissaries”, *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 15, no. 2 (1991), 273–80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43385269>.

6 For further reading, Marco Fasolio “Between History, Exoticism, and Enlightened Prejudices: Some Aspects of Byzantine Presence in Video Games, *What Byzantinism is this in Istanbul!* (İstanbul: Pera Müzesi Yayınları, 2021), 232-263.

7 For a detailed discussion, please refer to the podcast *Byzantium & Friends* by Anthony

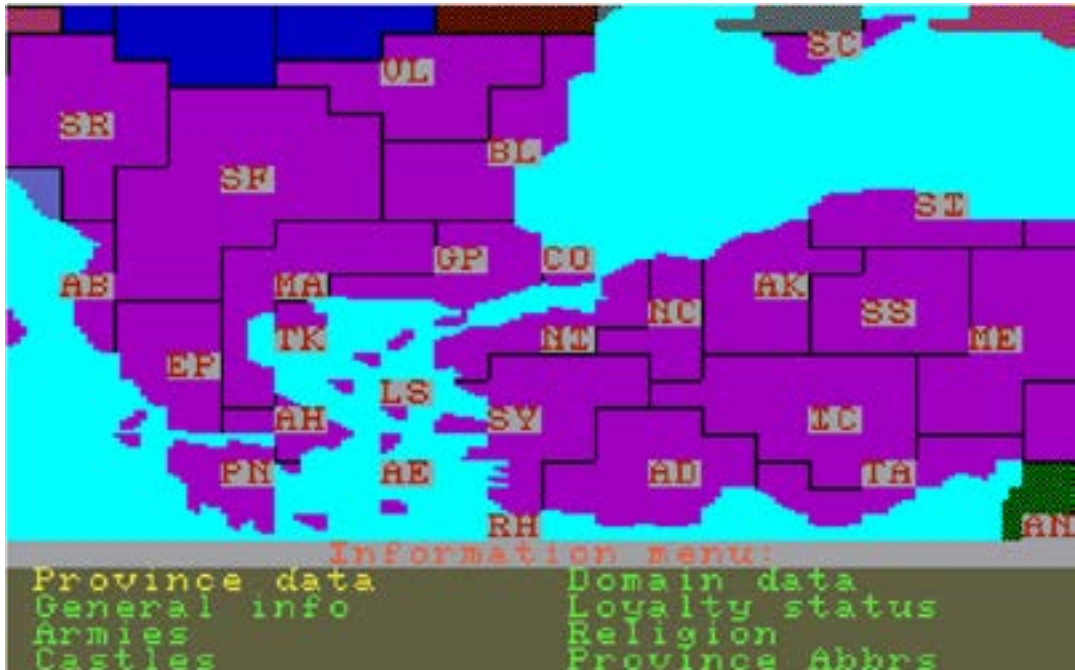


Fig. 5. *Medieval Lords*: from the game *Soldier Kings of Europe*

offered the Western audience three elements they desired most in a Byzantine narrative: religious devotion - the game had a faith bonus -, abundant use of purple, and the inclusion of the Hippodrome. The depiction of Theodora showcased in a video on one of the screens at the Pera Museum exhibition, draws inspiration from Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant's painting *The Empress Theodora at the Coliseum*. The queen is also adorned with the same crown seen in the mosaics of the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna.

In the game, Theodora frequently emphasized cultural dominance over victories achieved through force, prioritizing the cultural and religious upliftment of her people. The historian Procopius' demonic depiction of the empress is mirrored through her role as an ally capable of switching sides at any moment. Meanwhile, her charismatic aspect, a source of endless inspiration for the French playwright Victorien Sardou for his eponymous theatre play, is embodied in her intimidating and unpredictable demeanor. Theodora in *Civilization* rarely sought

Kaldellis, episode "Byzantium in Video Games, with Troy Goodfellow".

help, occasionally displaying extreme friendliness before suddenly becoming enraged. Considerable effort was also invested in accurately representing the Attic Greek spoken by the empress, including the incorporation of the middle voice, a linguistic feature found in few languages globally, into her dialogues. *Civilization V*, in line with its concept of “civilization” that serves as the foundation for the game, offered a depiction that undoubtedly relies on clichés but managed to exhibit sufficient nuance for a video game.

In his work *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*, Montesquieu characterizes Theodora as a woman who engaged in prostitution for many years, asserting that the passions and fantasies of her gender eclipsed the most glorious victories of the empire.⁸ The language he employed to articulate his overall opinions about the Byzantine officials was also centered on continual deterioration and corruption. Having weathered centuries of disparaging portrayals by Montesquieu, Procopius, and others, I aspire to witness Theodora finally receiving her rightful recognition and playing a leading role in a fourth-wave feminist game. Envisioning the Byzantines as protagonists in a strategy game that transcends mere conniving tactics would be a welcome change as well.

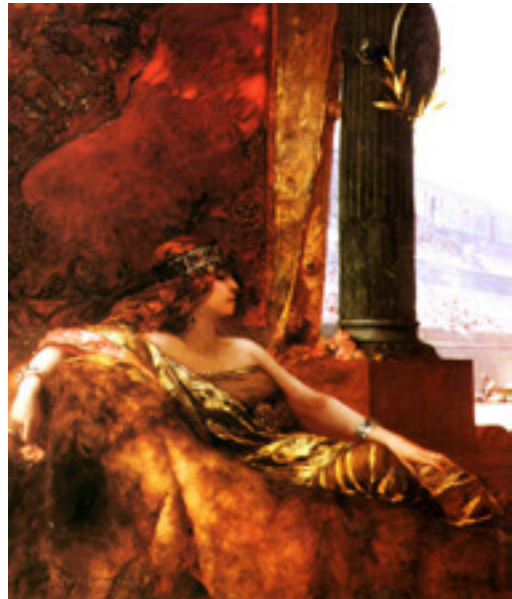


Fig. 6. Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant (1845-1902), *The Empress Theodora at the Coliseum*, c. 1889. Private Collection. Art Renewal Center Museum, image 7554. Public domain.

⁸ Montesquieu, *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des romains et de leur décadence* (Paris: Poussielgue, 1907),187.



Fig. 7. Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *La Emperatriz Theodora*, 1887, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires (Wikimedia Commons).



So called Missorium of Kerch, 4th century Found: Bosporan Necropolis, vault on the Gordikov estate. Near Kerch, the Crypt in the North-Eastern Slope of Mount Mithridates, 1891 This silver dish was a diplomatic gift from the Byzantine Emperor to a representative of the Bosporan government. In this fine example of the early Byzantine art traditional Classical themes are combined with a new artistic style. The vessel shows a composition typical of Roman coins: the Emperor on horseback is piercing the enemy with a spear. The rider was usually accompanied by one or several warriors and Nike crowning the winner. In contrast to the Classical composition showing the final scene of a battle, here we see the scene of triumph: Emperor Constantius II sits on a horse, triumphantly raising his spear. To emphasize the Emperor's highest rank and divine power, the artist used special pictorial devices including, for example, the distortion of proportions. The images were produced by a chisel. Part of the ornamentation is nielloed. The outer surface is gilded and a loop is soldered onto it. Hermitage Museum. Saint Petersburg. CC BY-SA 4.0 (Wikimedia Commons).

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