

Title: Whose Bones Are These? History, Memory, Identity, and the Bones of Byzantine Emperor(s) at Trebizond (Trabzon)

Date: Exact construction date unknown, but probably 14th or 15th century

Geography: Trabzon (Trebizond), Turkey

Culture: Byzantine, Ottoman

Medium: Stone blocks and carving



Fig. 1. The tomb monument in the courtyard of the Panagia Chrysokephalos Church, Trabzon, with the excavators Feodor Uspensky and Feodor Morozov standing next to it. Photographed during the 1916 Russian archaeological expedition. Reproduced from Chrysanthos Philippides, “Η Ἐκκλησία τῆς Τραπεζοῦντος [The Church of Trebizond],” *Ἀρχαῖον Πόντου* 4–5 (1933): 1–1070, at plate 10. Image in the public domain.

“alt-text: Historic archival photograph from 1916 showing the outdoor, open-air canopy tomb of Byzantine Emperor Alexios IV Megas Komnenos at the Panagia Chrysokephalos Church courtyard in Trabzon. Two uniformed members of the Russian archaeological expedition stand to the left of the freestanding stone monument. The structure features four marble columns supporting round arches decorated with faint circular relief medallions, covered by a weathered,

overhanging terracotta tiled canopy roof. Debris and excavated earth surround the stone base of the monument.”

Keywords: Trebizond, Trabzon, Hoşoğlu, Grand Komnenoi, Fatih Cami, Chrysokephalos, Greek-Turkish religious identity

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When one visits the former Byzantine church of the Golden-Headed Virgin (Chrysokephalos, now Fatih Cami) in Trabzon today, the entrance from the east leads through an underground space with toilets and space for ablution. Yet where the toilets now stand once rose a tomb: a ciborium-style structure with crosses carved on its columns, reminiscent of Byzantine imperial burials. Much of it was covered over with decoration and a wooden superstructure during the nineteenth century, but local Turks remembered it as the grave of Hoşoğlu, a Muslim warrior said to have died firing a cannon that blasted open Trebizond’s gates in 1461.¹

This contested tomb stood at the intersection of rival memories. Orthodox Christians believed it housed relics of saints, while Muslims honored Hoşoğlu as their own martyr. In 1916, during World War I, Tsarist Russia occupied Trabzon as part of its campaign to “liberate” Christians and Armenians from Ottoman rule and to reclaim Byzantium’s heritage. Alongside soldiers came scholars: the Byzantinist Feodor Uspensky directed excavations at Chrysokephalos, which the occupiers planned to transform into a museum.²

When Uspensky examined the supposed tomb of Hoşoğlu, he noted its Christian crosses and suspected that it was an imperial tomb, as rumor said an emperor of Trebizond was buried at the church. Digging revealed two skeletons: one nearer the surface, which he identified with Hoşoğlu, and a deeper one, which he proclaimed to be Emperor Alexios IV of Trebizond (d. 1426). For Uspensky and his team, this was the triumph of Russian science over Turkish superstition—the “liberation” of a Byzantine emperor from Muslim appropriation.

The triumph was short-lived. The Russian occupation collapsed in 1917, and reconquering Turks destroyed the tomb.³ Local Greeks under the leadership of their metropolitan

¹ As reconstructed in Scott Kennedy, “A Tale of Two Skeletons? Greco-Turkish Cultural Memory, Sacred Space, and the Mystery of the Identity of the Occupants of a Now Lost Ciborium Byzantine Tomb at Trebizond,” *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 114 (2021): 198–99.

² Fedor Uspensky, “Усыпальница Трапезундского Императора Алексея IV Комнина [Usypal’nitsa Trapezundskogo Imperatora Alekseia IV Komnina / The Tomb of the Trebizond Emperor Alexios IV Megas Komnenos,” *Византийский Временник* [Vizantiiskii Vremennik] 23 (1917-1922): 1–14.

³ Chrysanthos Philippides, “Ἡ Ἐκκλησία τῆς Τραπεζοῦντος [The Church of Trebizond],” *Ἀρχεῖον Πόντου* 4–5 (1933): 1-1070, at plate 10; Muzaffer Lermioğlu, *Akçaabat: Akçaabat*

Chrysanthos, however, pressed Uspensky to surrender the body of their emperor.⁴ Smuggled to Greece during the population exchanges, the skeleton remained in the National Museum until the 1980s, when the Pontic diaspora obtained permission to rebury it at the monastery of Nea Soumela, where it rests today.⁵

While long accepted as fact,⁶ the traditional story raises questions. Ottoman forces never fired cannon at Trebizond.⁷ The city surrendered without bombardment, making Hoşoğlu's tale an invention of the nineteenth century. Our earliest source on the ciborium, an early-nineteenth-century witness, reports that the ciborium's crosses were still visible, meaning that the ciborium's decorations were covered up subsequently.⁸ It is plausible that Muslims may have explored the area in this period and indeed discovered human remains inside. When confronted by Greeks who thought they were concealing the relics of holy men buried in a Byzantine tomb in a former church space, these Muslims responded by recasting the tomb as one of their own, a fighter whose action established their community in the city.⁹

As products of ethnic tension between Greeks and Turks, we can perhaps disregard both narratives of the tomb's occupants. Nonetheless, it is still probable that Uspensky opened the tomb of not one but two emperors. Since Byzantine sources confirm Chrysoskephalos as the burial ground of Trebizond's emperors and the tomb resembles other royal tombs such as that of Manuel I Komnenos (r. 1143-1180),¹⁰ the tomb probably had at least one imperial occupant. In

Tarihi ve Birinci Genel Savaş – Hicret Hâtıraları [Akçaabat: History of Akçaabat and the First World War – Memoirs of the Migration] (İstanbul: Kardeşler Basımevi, 1949), 68.

⁴ Philippides, “Εκκλησία,” 397 n. 2.

⁵ See, for the harrowing story of the body's journey to Greece, Georgios Kandilaptis, “Τὸ ἱστορικὸν τῆς εἰς Ἑλλάδα μεταφορᾶς τῶν ὀστέων τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος τῆς Τραπεζοῦντος Ἀλεξίου Δ' Κομνηνοῦ,” *Ποντιακὰ Φύλλα* 2 (1937): 186–88 and, for its reburial, “Τὸ ἱστορικὸν τῶν ὀστέων τοῦ Ἀλεξίου Δ' (1417-1429),” *Ποντιακὴ Ἑστία* 2 (1980): 141–42, 233–49.

⁶ Giota Ioakeimidou, “Ἀλέξιος Δ' Κομνηνός, οἱ περιπέτειες ενός νεκροῦ,” schooltime.gr, May 15, 2016, <https://www.schooltime.gr/2016/05/15/alexios-d-komninos-oi-peripeteies-enos-nekrou/> [last accessed 5th June 2026]; Anthony Bryer, “The Faithless Kabazitai and Scholarioi,” in *Maistor: Classical, Byzantine and Renaissance Studies for Robert Browning*, ed. Ann Moffat (Canberra: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1984), 324; Lermioğlu, *Akçaabat*, 68–69; Hüseyin Albayrak, *Trabzon Orta Hisar ve Çevresi [Trabzon's Ortahisar and Its Surroundings]* (Trabzon: Trabzon Belediyesi Kültür Yayınları, 1998), 166–172; İsmail Sevük, *Yurttan Yazılar [Writings from the Homeland]* (Ankara: T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1987), 233.

⁷ So the sultan's functionary Tursun Beğ, *Târih-i Ebü'l-Feth [The History of the Father of Conquest]*, ed. A. Mertol Tulum (İstanbul: İstanbul Fetih Cemiyeti Yayınları, 1977), 110: “topa ve tüfge, yörüyişe ihtiyâc görülmedi” (“there was no need of cannonball, rifle, or assault”).

⁸ Minas Bzhshkean, *Ἡ ἱστορία τοῦ Πόντου ἢ τῆς Ἰωνίας ἁπλῶς [Patmut' iwn Pontosi or ē Seaw tsov / History of Pontus, Which is the Black Sea]* (Venice: I Vans Srboyn Ghazaru, 1819), 67–68; translated as Minas Bzhshkean, *Karadeniz kıyıları tarih ve coğrafyası, 1817-1819 [History and Geography of the Black Sea Coasts, 1817-1819]*, trans. Hrand D. Andreasyan (İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Basımevi, 1969), 47.

⁹ Kennedy, “A Tale of Two Skeletons?,” 205–7.

¹⁰ Nancy Sevcenko, “The Tomb of Manuel I Komnenos, Again,” in *Change in the Byzantine World in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries: First International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine*

Byzantium, multiple emperors or family members were often buried in the same tomb, so both skeletons may well belong to imperial occupants.¹¹

If so, the significance of the skeletons would be immense if they could be examined scientifically. These bones would be the only surviving remains of Roman emperors, unique in a world where time and conquest have destroyed nearly every other imperial body from Augustus to Constantine XI.¹² Unlike empty sarcophagi in Rome or looted mausolea in Constantinople, these remains could offer rare testimony: evidence of the emperors' diet and health, even possibly clues to how they lived and ruled on the empire's last frontier.

From a former tomb now toilet, the skeletons uncovered here are not just important as symbols of the struggle for national identity in Greece and Turkey but more broadly may well contribute to our understanding of the lives and lifestyles of Rome's final emperors. It would be a shame to retreat into identitarianism and regional politics, thinking, "realistically, the Pontic Greeks have very little, if anything to gain from [investigating the body], so it is unlikely to happen", as one Pontic Greek commentator has written in the academic journal of Pontic studies.¹³ Pontic Greeks have everything to gain by learning the true identity of the entombed person, pursuing truth and science.

Biography

Scott Kennedy is an assistant professor in the Program in Cultures, Literature, and Ideas at Bilkent University in Ankara. He studies the history of late Byzantium and its interaction with the classical tradition. His 2019 translated volume *Two Works on Trebizond* (Harvard University Press) presented two largely untranslated texts on the often mysterious late Byzantine empire of Trebizond, while articles in *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* shed light on new aspects of Trebizond's history.

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¹¹ E.g., John II Komnenos (r. 1118-1143) made provision in his monastic grant for his son to be buried in the same sarcophagus: Paul Gautier, "Le typikon du Christ Sauveur Pantocrator," *Revue des études byzantines* 32 (1974): 1–145, at 79.

¹² Excepting the mummy of a Latin princess found at Mistra, on which see Marielle Martiniani-Reber and Aimilia Bacourou, *Parure d'une princesse byzantine: tissus archéologiques de Sainte-Sophie de Mistra / Το ένδυμα μιας βυζαντινής πριγκίπισσας: αρχαιολογικά υφάσματα από την Αγία Σοφία του Μυστρά* (Geneva: Musées d'Art et d'Histoire, 2000). For the princess's possible identity as Cleope Malatesta, the wife of Theodore II Palaiologos (r. 1407-1443): Silvia Ronchey, "Giorgio Gemisto Pletone e i Malatesta," in *Sul ritorno di Pletone (un filosofo a Rimini): Atti del ciclo di conferenze, Rimini, 22 novembre-20 dicembre 2002*, edited by Moreno Neri and Walter Raffaelli (Rimini: Raffaelli Editore, 2003), 11-24, at 22–24; Diana Wright, "The Brides of 1420: Men Looking at Women's Bodies," in *Questions of Gender in Byzantine Society*, edited by Bronwen Neil and Lynda Garland (London: Routledge, 2013), 133–152, at 150-151.

¹³ Sam Topalides and Russel McCaskie, "Fedor Uspenskii's Archaeological Research in Trabzon during World War I," *Αρχαίον Πόντου* 62 (2022): 200-219, at 205 n. 18.

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