

The Temptations of the Night Journey: An Image from the Voyage of Nicephorus Gregoras through Serbia

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*A good traveller knows not where he's going.
A perfect traveller knows not whence he's coming from.*
(Lao Tze)

In patristic vocabulary, “night” was a metaphor for spiritual darkness and, in a broader sense, for sin, misfortune, and uncertainty. Thus, without a doubt, the meaning of the night features its damaging characteristic. The impenetrable darkness of the night wears a man down, deprives him of the necessary orientation signs, and engrosses him in blindness.² As pointed out by Rabanus Maurus, the signs of night are debauchery and vice, shamelessness and idolatry, swearing and the likes.³ At that time, human endeavours become impossible and the sheer vastness of night is dehumanizing.⁴ Only those whose endeavours harm human life and property, in other words, thieves and bandits, continue to roam this vastness of the night.⁵ Therefore, all the journeys taken during the night always carry the risk of turning into an adventure with

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² Sancti Gregorii papae, *Dialogorum libri IV de miraculis partum Italicorum*, Patrologia Latina 111, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Parisii: Migne, 1896), I 10.8.

³ Rabanus Maurus, *Expositionum In Leviticum Libri Septem*, Patrologia Latina 108, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Parisii: Migne, 1964), III.1; Ibid, *Enarratio Super Deuteronomium Libri Quatuor*, Patrologia Latina 108, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Parisii: Migne, 1964), II.6. Cf. C. Bojadziev, *Nošćta prež srednekovieto* [Night in the Middle Ages] (Sofija: Iztok-Zapad, 2000), 12.

⁴ Beda Venerabilis. *De temporum ratione liber*, ed. Charles W. Jones, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 123B (Turnhout: Brepols, 1977), 7.

⁵ Rabanus Maurus, *De Universo Libri Viginti Duo*, Patrologia Latina 111, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Parisii: Migne, 1852), X 6; Cf. Bojadziev, *Nošćta prež srednekovieto srednekovieto*, 12.

unpredictable consequences. One such journey was the voyage of Nicephorus Gregoras through Serbia.

Nicephorus Gregoras, a historian, statesman, and a leading Byzantine intellectual in the second quarter of the fourteenth century, travelled through Serbia. It was in 1327, or perhaps 1326,⁶ when by order of Emperor Andronicus II Palaeologus (1282–1328) he visited the court of King Stefan Uroš III of Dečani (1282–1321). This diplomatic mission's goal was to bring back to Constantinople Irene, mother-in-law of the Serbian king and daughter of the great logothete Theodore Metochites. Her daughter Maria Palaiologina married the Serbian king in the late summer of 1324.⁷

Interestingly, the Byzantine delegation consisted of one hundred and forty people with many work animals.⁸ It was not uncommon in the Middle Ages for the delegations that visited other countries' courts to consist of more than a hundred people. Thus, for example, the delegation from the Kievan Rus, which in the middle tenth century visited Constantinople and the court of Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (913–959), headed by Princess Olga, consisted of as many as one hundred and twenty-three members, eighty-eight men and thirty-five women.⁹

The delegation led by Nicephorus Gregoras did not choose the road via Thessaloniki, but rather turned at Amphipolis to *Via Egnatia* and continued along the river Strymonas, probably near Petrič, and then on

⁶ P. Schreiner, "Die Gesandtschaftsreise des Nikephoros Gregoras nach Serbien (1326/27)," *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 38 (1999/2000): 331–342.

⁷ M. Živojinović, "O vremenu sklapanja braka Stefana Uroša III (Dečanskog) sa Marijom Paleolog" [About the time of the marriage of Stefan Uroš III (Dečanski) with Maria Palaiologina], *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 38 (1999/2000): 327–330; S. Pirivatrić, "Podatak Nićifora Grigore o hronologiji braka Stefana Dečanskog i Marije Paleolog" [Report of Nikephoros Gregoras regarding the chronology of Stephan Uroš III marriage with Maria Palaiologena], in *Spomenica akademika Sime Ćirkovića*, ed. Srđan Rudić (Beograd: Istorijski institut, 2011), 337–345.

⁸ Nicephori Gregorae, *Epistulae II (Epistulas continens)*, ed. P. A. M. Leone (Matino: Tipografia di Matino, 1982), № 32, 106 (henceforth Greg. Epist. II); *Vizantijski izvori za istoriju naroda Jugoslavije* [Byzantine Sources for the History of the Peoples of Yugoslavia] VI, ured. Franjo Barišić, Božidar Ferjanić (Beograd: Vizantološki institut Srpske akademije nauka i umetnosti, 1986), 621. (Ninoslava Radošević) (henceforth *VINJ VI*)

⁹ F. Uspenski, *Istorija Vizantijskog carstva. Period Makedonske dinastije, 867–1057* [The History of the Byzantine Empire. Period of the Macedonian dynasty, 867–1057] (Beograd: Zepeter Book World, 2000), 299; 571.

to Strumica, Štip, and Skopje. In order to reach their final destination as soon as possible, one day, just around the sunset, the Byzantine emissaries, instead of pausing their voyage and spending the night at a safe location, continued on their journey. They were hoping to find a better place to spend the night, but it was not to be. Nicephorus Gregoras recorded the following:

Our hopes were in vain. Several bandit raids that had been repeatedly taking place in this area a while ago quickly turned this region into a desolate and uninhabited area. And we carried on like some planets, placing our faith in the God and unclear hopes. At that point the darkness came about: 'the sun had set and darkness covered the roads,'¹⁰ and there was no moon.¹¹

With this sentence, full of premonition and warning, Gregoras hinted at the troubles in which that the Byzantine delegation would soon find themselves. The learned polymath continued:

This moonless night was accompanied by the shadows of nearby hills. They were so tall that they covered the skies above us making it impossible, as the saying goes, to use the stars for directions in this unfortunate journey. 'And my heart broke in my chest,' because I was to go 'on a long and laborious trip.'¹² We came across very dense thicket, uneven terrain with many higher points and precipices. We no longer paid any notice to our clothes and shoes that were completely torn by the thorny bushes; we were worried about our eyes because the thick and endless tree branches became enemies of our faces; letting go of the reins of our horses, we used our hands to cover our faces. And among the servants who were accompanying us and were paying no attention whatsoever to our fear, there were some who were making a lot of noise and singing heroic songs; they were singing about the famous feats of heroes whose glory 'we

¹⁰ Homer, *Iliad*, *Volume I: Books 1-12*, trans. A. T. Murray, revised William F. Wyatt, Loeb Classical Library 170 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), II, 338. (henceforth Homer, *Odyssey*)

¹¹ Greg. Epist. II, № 32, 106–107; *VIIINJ VI*, 622. (Ninoslava Radošević).

¹² Homer, *Odyssey*, IV, 481 and IV, 393.

just hear about and know nothing more.¹³ And the precipices and so many valleys between the surrounding hills took in the noise and, like some living beings, kept it unchanged and intact and with the same melody echoed like melodious choirs that take turns and sing in the same key. And in the midst of it all I did my best to keep my sanity and persevere and not give into my fears; but my reason would not be convinced, but rather was scolding me for taking this journey in the ill time, and kept going back to the notions of ambushes and bandits and bloodthirsty men, so as not to jump from the side and make us a prey to their daggers.¹⁴

Nicephorus Gregoras evidently succumbed to the atmosphere of uncertainty and fear that prevented him from rational thinking. The journey reached its critical point, and thus the Byzantine historian recorded:

As we were advancing, suddenly some men jumped in front of us from behind those precipices and rocks, dressed in black wool and leather that they would take from the animals when needed, resembling some demonic appearance. However, they were not soldiers in armour, although their weapons were more than light, as most of them were prepared for direct combat, carrying spears and axes. Some of them carried crossbows. At first sight we were shocked and terrified. And how could we not be? In a foreign land, at such an hour of a day, and, besides, they were speaking a foreign language. Most of them were Mizians (Bulgarians), who have lived in the surrounding areas since the old times and lived alongside our countrymen.¹⁵

However, their intentions were good as they explained that they guarded the roads with the goal to prevent any robbers from coming to their neighbourhood. They soon could hear the dogs barking from a

¹³ Homer, *Iliad*, *Volume I: Books 1-12*, trans. A. T. Murray, revised William F. Wyatt, Loeb Classical Library 170 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), II, 486; IX, 189; *Ibid*, *Odyssey*, VIII, 73.

¹⁴ Greg. Epist. II, № 32, 107-108.

¹⁵ Greg. Epist. II, № 32, 108.

nearby village, and that completely dissuaded the tired Byzantine travellers who longed for rest after the difficult night adventure.

We hurried towards the village and everyone ended up in a different inn, like shipwrecked men who after the storm were looking for any kind of port. As they say that a piece of bread is sweet to a hungry man regardless of its quality, so we thought it pleasant and joyful to roll over in ashes.¹⁶

In this case, a night journey that could have turned into an unfortunate incident, concluded quite unexpectedly with a happy ending. However, things could have ended quite differently.

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¹⁶ Greg. Epist. II, № 32, 109.

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