Imperial and empirical city: 
Famagusta’s representations in the poetry of 
Kyriakos Charalambides

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The word “empire” denotes something great and strong, old and new and is often associated with both the past and the present. For historians and theorists, the word empire may be coupled with power, expansion, imperialism and politics, whereas for most people it may be associated with stories, fascination and extravagance. For the Cypriot poet, Kyriakos Charalambides (1940–), “empire” is a life experience and makes up both his recent and distant past. This paper aims to give a close reading of Charalambides’ representations of the Byzantine Empire in his poetic work through the parallel or identification of the city of Famagusta — the poet’s muse — to the imperial city of Constantinople. Charalambides’ representation of the Byzantine Empire is recorded through a conscious turn or journey to the past, a journey filtered through the events of the coup d’état and the Turkish invasion of 1974.

This paper is based on my current research project which investigates historical and literary critical approaches to the question of “empire” and examines the representation of empires in the Modern Greek poetry of Cyprus. The poetic work selected from Vassilis Michaelides, Demetris Lipertis, Costas Montis and Kyriakos Charalambides is written between 1878 — marking the arrival of the British on the island and the last empire to rule Cyprus before its independence in 1960, and 2004 — marking Cyprus’ accession to the European Union. In summary, I should highlight that even though the poets were born under Ottoman or British rule, with Michaelides and Lipertis born when Cyprus was under Ottoman rule and Montis and Charalambides under British rule, their representations of “empire” do not only stem from direct experience with these empires, but also from a selective and intentional “journey” to the long history of the island that goes back to the Byzantine and Venetian Empires and the Frankish Kingdom of Cyprus. Here, I concentrate on Kyriakos Charalambides, the most contemporary poet in my research and examine through the detailed reading of his work his representations of the Byzantine Empire.
Born in 1940 in the small village of Achna near Ammochostos/Famagusta, Kyriakos Charalambides has experienced important events in the recent history of his homeland. He experienced the Cypriot Struggle for Liberation 1955–59 as a teenager and the 1974 coup d’etat and the Turkish invasion as a grown man. As it might have been expected of a poet of his time, Charalambides’ poetic work is primarily if not solely historically framed by the events which have marked the modern history of Cyprus and which are expressed in his poetic work through a journey to the past and the long history of Cyprus and more specifically through the Byzantine, Ottoman, Venetian, Frankish and British past. Beyond Charalambides’ deep and thorough knowledge of history, given his background and education (he had studied History and Archaeology at the University of Athens), his interest and perhaps this “passionate devotion” to the events that led to the coup d’etat and the Turkish invasion of 1974 emanates from direct experience of the events.

It may be argued that all Cypriot poets of Charalambides’ generation concentrate on the 1974 events and depict or record the tragic events of their homeland in their work. The difference with Charalambides, however, is that he records the events and expresses his views and thoughts not only through his homeland — in other words, Cyprus as a whole but also through his hometown, Famagusta. Famagusta becomes the symbol through which Charalambides expresses his personal thoughts, views and sentiments but it also becomes the symbol through which he reconstructs his past and interprets his recent past and present. Starting from the poetic collection _Αμμόχωστος Βασιλεύουσα_ (first published by Ερμής in 1982), Famagusta becomes Charalambides’ muse throughout his poetic work and has been argued to be for him apart from his source of inspiration or the way to channel his political, historical and emotional sentiments, what Beatrice was for Dante or Alexandria for Cavafy. I will take this a step further and argue that Famagusta is not simply Charalambides’ muse, but also the starting point or even the core that triggers Charalambides’ journey to the past and thus in this case representing the Byzantine Empire.

The so-called “ghost town” of Famagusta is identified with or is paralleled to Constantinople and St Sophia as found in folk songs or as known by the legend of the return of the Last Emperor of Constantinople, according to which Constantine XI did not die when the city fell, but sleeps and one day will return to the city. Famagusta, whether she is seen as “Η Πόλις” referring to Constantinople viewed historically as the centre of the Byzantine Empire, or whether she is seen as a woman temptress (or

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2 Henceforth all lines from _Αμμόχωστος Βασιλεύουσα_ are cited from the Άγρα, 1997 edition. (Κυριάκος Χαραλαμπίδης, _Αμμόχωστος Βασιλεύουσα_. Αθήνα: Άγρα, 1997.)
3 Charalambides discusses the characterisation of Famagusta by the media as a “ghost-town” in an interview he gave to Stelios Koukos for the newspaper _Macedonia_ on July 16, 2000: “Η Αμμόχωστος δεν αποτελεί την ’πόλη φάντασμα’ των ΜΜΕ και των πολιτικών. Αντίθετα αποτελεί την πόλη οράμα των ποιητών. Ως τέτοιος δεν μπορεί να εξανεμίστηκε από το βάρος της αδήριτης ιστορικής πραγματικότητας γιατί ακριβώς την υπερβαίνει κι έχει διαρκώς την ιδιότητα να προβάλλει εξαίρετη” (2009b:297).
prostitute) as interpreted in post-byzantine folk beliefs and folk songs, or whether she is identified with Cavafy’s “Η Πόλις” which triggers the poet's memory and thus his journey to the past, or lastly whether she is identified with the passion of Christ — his birth, death and rebirth — as seen in the Byzantine liturgical tradition becomes the key to unlock the poet's relationship with the Byzantine Empire.

Charalambides talks about this complex role of the city of Famagusta and more specifically of its double nature in his essay “Ενθύμιον Αμμοχώστου” first published in 1997. Famagusta is characterised as a coin with two sides, one being that of the saint and the other one being that of the prostitute or the woman temptress, as depicted in the poems of Αμμόχωστος Βασιλεύουσα:

“Όταν η Αμμόχωστος έρχεται στον ύπνο μου, κατά παράξενο τρόπο το όνειρο μου έχει ως μοτίβο ένα νόμισμα. Ένα βαρύ νόμισμα [...]. Ο γέρο-θείος Στυλιανός από το Ριζοκάρπασο μου το χάρισε για να το θυμάμαι. Ο θείος πέθανε, το νόμισμα έμεινε στην Αμμόχωστο, αλλά το ενθύμιο παραμένει στην καρδιά μου για να υπογραμμίζει πιοτέρο δυο στίχους από την Αμμόχωστο Βασιλεύουσα: ‘Νομίσματα χρυσά μὲς στὶς πλεξοῦδε τῶν κυμάτων / τὰ παρασέρνει ὁ Ποσειδώνας ἐξω’.” (Charalambides, 2009b:267)

5 Referring here to the role of the woman temptress in the songs of exile. Indicatively, see Saunier, G., ed., Το δημοτικό τραγούδι της ξενιτιάς. Αθήνα: Βιβλιοπωλείον της Εστίας, 1990.
These lines come from Charalambides’ poem “Τρέμει ο Κορμός” written in January 1981 and published in Αμμόχωστος Βασιλεύουσα. The poem, written seven years after the Turkish invasion of 1974, summarises the poet’s short journey to the past — triggered by course of the recent event of the invasion.

The poem starts with a reference to “ρήγαινα” (“queen”) who, as Charalambides clarifies in the notes at the back of the collection, is the female heroine who will tell the legends of the history of Cyprus and is often associated with the Frankish Kingdom of Cyprus (Το Φράγκικο ρηγάτο της Κύπρου) as also found in the Chronicle of Makhairas (Dawkins, 1932). Alternatively the term is often used in folklore as a characteristic name for Cyprus. “Ρήγαινα” here is not only Cyprus but Famagusta too. “Ρήγαινα” is trembling from what she has experienced in the city (during the 1974 Turkish invasion) which is now deserted and provides no reminder of the old Famagusta or Ancient Salamis. Charalambides jumps back and forth in time through an imagery of death from the folkloric references to ρήγαινα (and thus indirectly alluding to the Frankish kingdom) to his recent past just a few years before the 1974 invasion and the cars that used to take the people of Famagusta from Famagusta to Rizokarpaso; and then he jumps again to the present time and refers to the so-called “green line” (πράσινη γραμμή) — in other words the United Nations buffer zone that runs through Nicosia and separates the North part of the island from the South since the Turkish invasion of 1974:

Βλέπει τὰ σύννεφα, ποὺ τριγυρίζουν τοὺς νεκροὺς,
τὴν κλεμμένη κιθάρα — πουλιά στὶς χορδές.

Ταξιδεύει μὲ αὐτοκίνητο τῆς γραμμῆς
τὴ βένετη γραμμή — ...

Now the reference to both the “green line” and the “light blue line” suggests that the poet not only refers to the United Nations buffer zone, but also to the divisions of clubs or parties (δήμοι) of the hippodrome in Byzantine times and more specifically under Justinian’s reign in AD 527–568. There were four hippodrome clubs which were represented by the lower social strata and distinguished by colour: πράσινοι (green), βένετοι (light blue), ρούσοι (red) and λευκοί (white). Historians have characterised these hippodrome clubs (πράσινοι και βένετοι) as being quite similar to political parties since their actions interfered with political decisions (Evans, 1996:125). By choosing to refer to the blue colour specifically and not to a white or red line the poet is indirectly identifying the division of the island following 1974 with the divisions during Byzantine rule and more specifically with AD 532 and the events that led to what has later became known as “Η Στάση του Νίκα”.

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7 See Charalambides, 1997:150. “Τῆς ρήγαινας: Θηλυκὴ ἠρωίδα ποὺ ἐκφράζει γεγονότα τοῦ θρύλου καὶ τῆς Ιστορίας τῆς Κύπρου [...].

8 For more details on the "Nika riots" (Η Στάση του Νίκα) see Evans, 1996.
This jumping back and forth from the present to the past, shows Charalambides’ conscious attempts to remember and record the past glories and images of the city as opposed to what he really has to face seven years after the invasion — at the time of writing the poem. The poet therefore intentionally turns to the history of Famagusta and the ancient ruins of Salamis: “῾Η Σαλαμίνα ἀντικρυστά μὲ σένα / ψάχνει γιὰ νέους κρυψῶνες...” and refers to the fourth-century AD earthquakes that buried a great part of the ancient city under the sea. The image of Poseidon leaving coins on the coast of Famagusta therefore refers to the buried city of Salamis found in the depths of the sea.

The sea washes the coins from the buried Salamis to the coast — highlighting further with this image, which combines the old with the new, the double nature of the city. The lines “Γυμνή ἀφιλόξενη γυναίκα / μὲ τὸ κοπάδι τὰ μαλλιά” which are followed by the lines “...Φυτρώνουν πόλεις, / παλάτια καὶ παλαϊστρες, θέατρα, ἀγορές” refer to the transformation of the city from an “inhospitable woman” or a city in decline — a city in ruins, to a more prosperous city with palaces, theatres and markets in order to conclude that this city is a magical place: “Αὐτός ὁ τόπος εἶναι μαγεμένος”.

The line “Αὐτός ὁ τόπος εἶναι μαγεμένος” surely alludes to Seferis’ “εκεί όπου το θαύμα λειτουργεί ακόμη” (Seferis, 1955:51) and his “Κύπρον οὐ μ᾽ ἐθέσπισεν...” (Ημερολόγιο Καταστρώματος Γ’) dedicated to Cyprus. Where Seferis was referring to
Cyprus as a whole, Charalambides pinpoints the “magic” or the “miracle” in the city of Famagusta. Charalambides’ dialogue with Seferis has been discussed extensively both by critics and the poet himself in his two volumes of essays titled “Ολισθηρός Ιστός” (2009). In his essay “Η Κυπριακή εμπειρία του Σεφέρη” first published in 2000, Charalambides argued that even Seferis acknowledged that the miracle he had experienced in Cyprus starts in Famagusta (“η πόλη όραμα”), in his poem “Ο Πραματευτής από τη Σιδώνα” (Charalambides, 2009a:44) with the line, “μπήκε στην Κύπρο από τη θαλασσινή πόρτα της Αμμοχώστου” (Seferis, 1955:33). In the poem “Τρέμει ο Κορμός” however, Charalambides alludes to Seferis’ poem “Σαλαμίνα τῆς Κύπρος”. The lines: “Μὲ τὸ σκοινὶ μπορεῖς νὰ μεταφέρεις / στὴ ράχη σου μιὰ πόλη...” contradicts to Seferis’ (and thus Makrygiannis too):

`Ἡ γῆς δὲν ἔχει κρικέλια γιὰ νὰ τὴν πάρουν στὸν ὦμο καὶ νὰ φύγουν μήτε μποροῦν ὃσο κι ἂν εἶναι διψασμένοι νὰ γλυκάνουν τὸ πέλαγο μὲ νερό μισό δράμι (Seferis, 1955:44)

Seferis argues through the heroic and symbolic words of Makrygiannis that the land belongs to its people since carrying off the earth is clearly impossible and, as Krikos-Davis highlights, “an act of madness” (Krikos-Davis, 1994:141) suggesting of course that the attempts of the British to construct an individual Cypriot consciousness in the 1930s and 1950s — one that has nothing to do with Greece — was clearly impossible. In contrast, Charalambides, some thirty years after Seferis’ poem, argues that you can carry away your city with a piece of rope. Charalambides does not adopt here Seferis’ thinking of the 1950s (directed towards the British Empire and its policies against the people’s wishes for enosis), but adopts the Cavafian “Η πόλις θα σε ακολουθεί” (Cavafy, 1991a:21). Charalambides argues that as with Cavafy’s “Η Πόλις”, people have the city or their homeland within them since memory functions as a trigger for one to go back and remember the past as Charalambides does in the poem “Τρέμει ο Κορμός”.

Charalambides ends the poem with the bad news that the city has been captured: “Ασκημα νέα, τὴν πήρανε τὴν πόλη / πήραν καὶ τὴν παράλλη καὶ τὴν ἄλλη / Βγαίνουν ἀπ’ τοὺς κρυψῶνε τὰ παιδιά...”. These lines remind the reader of the known folk song “Πήραν την πόλη πήραν την”, which refers to the fall of Constantinople in 1453. In this way Charalambides clearly identifies the fall of Famagusta in 1974 with the


10 For more details on the British government’s effort to promote and create a Cypriot consciousness that has nothing to do with Greece as well as on the laws issued banning the use of the word “enosis” in writing and public speeches see Hill, 1952 Vol. IV: 492–495; Hadjidemetriou, 2002:369–380; Pavlides, 1993:304; 308, 314, and Holland, 1998:9–19.

11 On the role of memory in relation to Cavafy’s Alexandria see Keeley, 1996.
fall of Constantinople in 1453. These lines not only allude to a number of different versions of the folk song but also to Cavafy’s “Πάρθενος” (1877). Cavafy draws from the history of the Byzantine Empire and uses oral tradition in “Πάρθενος” to make a logical adaptation of the folk song and thus carry the folk tradition forward by not only being in dialogue with it, but also embedding it in a modern poem: “Σίτ’ ἀναγνώσθ’ σίτ’ ἀνακλαίγ’ σίτ’ ἀνακρούγ’ τὴν κάρδιαν. / Ν’ ἀοιλλῆ ἐμὰς, να βαί ἐμὰς, ἡ Ρωμανία πάρθεν.” (Cavafy, 1993:108). Charalambides too uses tradition to allude to the contemporary context. It appears that both Charalambides and Cavafy, who are learned poets, appropriate oral tradition through their reading which in the case of Charalambides highlights continuity.

Hence the change Charalambides makes to the line as we know it from the folk song, to “πήραν καὶ τὴν παράλλη καὶ τὴν ἄλλη”, suggests a continuity in the way Charalambides understands and interprets the past, a continuity from Byzantine times to the present and the fall of cities from one foreign ruler to another. “Καὶ τὴν παράλλη καὶ τὴν ἄλλη” suggests not only the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and other Greek cities in between (πήραν τὴ Σαλονίκη), but also the fall of Famagusta and the other cities taken in 1974. Clearly, “τὴν πήραν τὴν πόλη” alludes to Constantinople and thus to the Byzantine past whereas the lines “πήραν τὴν ἄλλη καὶ τὴν παράλλη” suggest indirectly the passing on in this case of the city of Famagusta from one empire to another in the past and in the present its fall to Turkey in 1974.

This parallel of the two cities or the identification of one with the other is also clearly evident in the poem “Ακέφαλο Άγαλμα” written in 1980. Charalambides alludes here to Seferis’ Μυθιστόρημα and more specifically to poem III and the lines: “Ξύπνησα μὲ τὸ μαρμάρινο τοῦτο κεφάλι στὰ χέρια / ποὺ μοῦ εξαντλεί τοὺς ἀγκῶνες καὶ δὲν ξέρω ποῦ νὰ τ’ ἀκουμπήσω”. As opposed to Seferis, however, who is unaware where the marble head has come from, Charalambides knows where the head of the statue is found: it was transferred with great care as if it was a Saint’s head to Constantinople by the Byzantine emperors and is now protected by Saint Sophia. This image also alludes to Charalambides’ poem “Φιάλη Αγάλματος Χαλκού”, written almost twenty years later and published in Δοκίμιον in 2000, where the statue of Athena (which Pausanias had asked Pheidias to craft so as to honour and commemorate the victory of the Greeks in Marathon), was transferred to Byzantium: “τὴν Κωνσταντίνου πόλη νὰ στολίζει”.12 In this case however, the poet is looking for the body of the statue: “Ὅμως ἐμείς, περίτεχνο κεφάλι / ζητάμε τ’ ἀποδέλοιπό σου σώμα / σὲ πόλη ποῦ σοῦ μοιάζει”.

The city that resembles the marble head of the statue that carries the weight of the past in Seferis’ Μυθιστόρημα is in Charalambides the city of Famagusta. The head of this woman figure-statue that symbolises Famagusta is found in Constantinople. The poet is thus suggesting here that these two cities share the same woes and carry the burden of their past. Both cities wait for their freedom; Constantinople is waiting for

12 For a more detailed historical background on the poem see Georgiadou, 2007:324–325.
the return of the Last Emperor and Famagusta to regain its past glories: “Καημένη πόλη, τόσα χρόνια στό κρεβάτι / χωρίς τής κορυφής τό λυχνοστάτη / ἀκέφαλη καί κρύα σὰν τό μολόβη”. Famagusta here is not simply an inhospitable woman, as in the poem examined above, or a cold mutilated statue, as in Seferis, but is also characterised as a woman temptress and a prostitute who has been passed since Byzantine times from one foreign ruler to another and is now post 1974 in the arms of Turkey. The city with her past glories and prosperity which resembles the imperial city of Constantinople, the centre of the Byzantine Empire, is now lost and all is left of it is a “ghost city”: “είχαμε μπροστά μας το φάντασμα της νεκρής πολιτείας που αναζητούσε απελπιστικά το αρχαίο πρόσωπό της…” (Charalambides, 1984).

The poet therefore shows his bitterness as well as his anger for the misery of the city, feelings that are triggered by memory (“φυσικὴ ἀνάμνηση θνητῶν”) and so hints that the catharsis of memory comes through the glories of the past and the hope for the future (“τὸν καθαρμὸ τῆς μνήμης”). Further, the end of the poem highlights the double nature of Famagusta alluding once again to the poet’s dream where Famagusta resembles a coin with two sides and clearly identifies Famagusta (Αμμόχωστος Βασιλεύουσα) with Constantinople (“τῆς πόλης, ποῦ βασίλευε”) as well as reminding the reader of Byzantine times when Famagusta was a rich and prosperous city: 

Ἡ κάρα σου σὲ μιὰ πελώρια κούτα
γαρνιρισμένη σερμπάτινες κι ἀστεράκια,
χάρτινα ὅλα, σπόρους τῆς ἀντρείας,
κοσμοταξίδεψε νὰ ἐναποτεθεῖ
μὲς’ ἀπὸ οἴκους ἀνοχῆς καὶ καμπαρὲ
στὸν οὐρανὸ τῆς πόλης, ποῦ βασίλευε.

Famagusta, as the title of the poetic collection suggests is a city that rules — βασιλεύει. She is thus an imperial city as was the case with the heart of the Byzantine Empire. Arguably, Byzantium is found in the title of the collection and the Byzantine liturgical tradition within the collection. Αμμόχωστος Βασιλεύουσα reminds the reader of the passion of Christ, his death and resurrection. In the same vein, Charalambides sees the 1974 Turkish invasion as the death of Famagusta and hopes for her future resurrection drawing from the city’s past; in other words he hopes for a possible rebirth of the city such as he has also witnessed in the past through history with the death and re-birth of Ancient Salamis in “Τρέμει ο Κορμός”. The cycle of Jesus Christ’s birth, death and re-birth as is known through the Byzantine liturgical tradition is thus recreated in the collection in the symbol of Famagusta.

As Michael Tsianikas points out in his detailed analysis of Αμμόχωστος Βασιλεύουσα — Τὸ όνομα τῆς Αμμοχώστου the first poem in the collection “Η αρχή ενός ειδύλλιου” begins with the lines: “Εἶχα γυρίσει τὸ κεφάλι ανάστροφα καὶ κοίταζα / τὸν οὐρανὸ μὲ τ’ ἀστρα ματωμένα”. The bleeding stars represent an image of death, “ζόντας τή στιγμή τῆς δόνυς καὶ τοῦ πένθους, πρὶν τήν ἀναβαλλόμενη (ἡ ναυ- αγισμένη) Ἀνάστασι” (Tsianikas, 2003:57), which contradicts the last poem of
the collection “Αγγείο Ελεύθερου Ρυθμού” and its concluding line “κεκαθαρμένα τ’ ἄστρα τ’ οὐρανοῦ” which draws the reader away from the bleeding stars of the first poem of the collection and suggests a type of rebirth or resurrection, or even catharsis (κεκαθαρμένα) to put it in ecclesiastical language. This cycle of Αμμόχωστος Βασιλεύουσα which starts with “the bleeding stars” and ends with “the purified stars”, may be read parallel to the cycle of the life of Jesus: the bleeding stars to his death (=fall of the city) and the purified stars to his resurrection (=rebirth or rise of the city). It is to this cycle that the poet parallels his collection with the hope that Famagusta will be in the end resurrected as it has been in the past with its previous rulers and empires: “ξεκινώ από την Αμμόχωστο, την κατακτημένη πόλη και αφαιρώντας πέπλους [...] φτάνω στην τέλεια αστραφτερή απογύμνωση της Βασιλείας των ουρανών...” (Charalambides, 1989). In the same manner that the folk legend gives hope to the people that the Marble King will return, the poet hopes that the rise or liberation of the city will come and the city will resurrect the same way Christ did. The poet’s wishful thinking is evidently rooted to the parallelism of Famagusta to Constantinople and the awaiting of the return of the last Byzantine Emperor to the City.

This cycle of birth–death–rebirth with which the poet plays throughout Αμμόχωστος Βασιλεύουσα as well as the symbolism of the city of Famagusta, become the tools the poet uses in his representations of the Byzantine Empire throughout his poetic
The poem “Επιτάφιος Πόλις” written in March 1984 and published in his poetic collection Θόλος (first published by Ερμής, 1989) refers to Famagusta. As Tsianikas rightly points out, the poem in its characteristics belongs in the collection Αμμόχωστος Βασιλεύουσα, for it is set in Famagusta (2003:58). It is thus argued here that its main character, Myres, is part of this cycle of birth–death–rebirth. Tsianikas adds: “ζεῖ με τὸν δικὸ του τρόπο τὴν ἐπιτάφια στιγμὴ τοῦ ἔαρος’ τόσο κοντά στὸ σταυρικό ἔαρ τὸν ἐπιτάφιο θρῆνο ἄλλα καί τὴν ἀναμενόμενη ἀνάσταση” (Tsianikas, 2003:58). This poem also gives us the opportunity to highlight Charalambides “dialogue” with Cavafy through both poets’ interest in the Byzantine past. Myres refers to Cavafy’s “Μύρης Αλεξάνδρεια του 340 μ.Χ.” (Cavafy, 1991b:79). The date Cavafy gives to his poem refers to a time when there was a civil war between the sons of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine the Great as well as a great religious upheaval. The historical events and the religious upheaval of 340 AD are refracted in Cavafy through the character of Myres, whereas in Charalambides the historical events are refracted through Cavafy’s Myres and indirectly through the city of Famagusta.13

Now similar to Cavafy, Charalambides’ poems that come after Αμμόχωστος Βασιλεύουσα and Θόλος show genuine historical interest in Byzantine Cyprus in retelling and/or recreating certain historical events in amalgamation with myths and folk legends.14 Arguably in Charalambides’ Μεθιστορία (1995), perhaps even more so in his later collections, it appears that the poet becomes less hopeful and more despondent about the possible resurrection of Famagusta as is the case with the poem “Το δε την Πόλιν”, written in May 1983 and published in Μεθιστορία. The poem recreates two versions of the folk legend where Constantine replies to Mehmet II’s demand to surrender Constantinople and flee to the Peloponnese with the Cavafian according to the poet: “ἐκεῖνο τὸ Καβαφικὸ ‘τὸ δὲ τὴν πόλιν / σοι δοῦναι, οὔτ’ ἐμὸν οὔτ’ ἂλλου / τῶν κατοικούντων — λέει — ἐν ταύτῃ’”.15

The twist of the poem however is in the fact that Charalambides presents his Constantine as weak and flawed: in other words he is not portrayed as the strong Emperor, who according to legend, stated that he or the citizens of the City had no right to surrender Constantinople to the Sultan for they had all decided to sacrifice their lives to defend their hometown, and so must Constantine. Charalambides projects a more human and thus weaker side of the Emperor, who even thinks of killing himself: “γιὰ μιὰ στιγμὴ τοῦ ἥρθε νὰ κραυγάσει / μπροστά στὴ Θεοτόκο μέσα στὸ ναὸ / καὶ μὲ τὸ κοντομάχαιρό του νὰ τελειώσει”.

Constantine’s state of mind, the weakness he shows momentarily as well as his inner thoughts, remind the reader to a degree of Cavafy’s heroes. Constantine however, reminds himself of his role as the Emperor of Byzantium and thus his obligation

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14 See Charalambides’ Μεθιστορία (1995) and the poems “Η Αγία Ελένη στην Κύπρο” (p. 35) and “Ισαάκιου Κομνηνού Έλλογος Παραφορά” (p. 36).

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to remain strong and defend not only his City but also the Empire itself. Byzantium – “the Greek Orthodox Kingdom” is personified here by Charalambides as a strong man who gives courage to Constantine and encourages him to remain strong: “πάψε — τοῦ λέει — νὰ κλαῖς. Θώρε και μένα”. These lines clearly allude to Cavafy’s Anthony in the poem “Απολέιπειν ο Θεός Αντώνιον” and the lines: “...μή ανοφέλετα θρηνήσεις / Σαν έτοιμος από καιρό, σα θαρραλέος / Αποχαιρέτα την, την Αλεξάνδρεια που φεύγει” (Cavafy, 1991a:26). The two men, the Emperor and “Greek-orthodox” kingdom — (“Οἱ δυὸ ὑπέροχοι ἂνδρες”) as the poet highlights — agreed that they should willingly sacrifice themselves for the Empire without fear or sorrow; and similar to Anthony who bids farewell to Alexandria, Constantine and the Byzantine Kingdom bid farewell to Constantinople. The repetition of the lines: “τὸ νιώσανε μεμιᾶς πὼς ‘αὐτοπροαιρέτως / ἀποθανοῦμεν’ (ἦταν μιὰ καλὴ / φράση τῆς ἱστορίας)” show a “cavafian” side to Constantine’s sacrifice.

Significantly, in this poem Charalambides does not retell the facts that led to the fall of the city nor does he recall the folk songs and legends about the marble King, but with his line in brackets “(ήταν μιὰ καλὴ / φράση τῆς ἱστορίας)” given the date the poem is written (nine years after the Turkish invasion) points subtly to the “sacrifice” the Greek-Cypriots made when they were leaving their homes in 1974. In the same manner that Cavafy’s Anthony is bidding farewell to the Alexandria he is losing, and Constantine is bidding farewell to Constantinople, so Charalambides may be argued to be implicitly bidding farewell to Famagusta in 1974, and thus referring to a continuity in the history of the island through the repetition of the phrase in brackets: “(ήταν μιὰ καλὴ / φράση τῆς ἱστορίας)” and his representations of the Byzantine past as a whole.

According to my argument, in Charalambides’ late collections it is evident that the poet becomes more despondent and less hopeful about a possible resurrection of the city of Famagusta or Cyprus as a whole, thus giving rise to further contradicting interpretations and discussions on whether Αμμόχωστος βασιλεύουσα is a city that rules (βασιλεύει) or a city that has fallen, similar to the image of the sun setting (το βασίλεμα του ήλιου). Whatever conclusions one draws on the role and dimension of “Βασιλεύουσα” via the analysis of the selected poetic work, it is safe to conclude that, through Charalambides’ turn to the Byzantine Empire and his interpretations of the folk tradition and culture, including the revival of post-byzantine folk beliefs and legends the poet re-interprets his recent history by reaching to the Byzantine past and thus in this way emphasising continuity in the history of Cyprus, bridging the past to the present.
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