Introduction

Umberto Eco's *Baudolino*, published in 2000, is chronologically the distinguished Italian writer's fourth novel and the second one set in the Middle Ages, the first one being *Il nome della rosa* (*The Name of the Rose*), Eco's most acclaimed fictional work. *Baudolino* holds a special place in a Byzantinist's heart, as it draws on one of the most important historical accounts to have come down to us from the Byzantine period: Niketas Choniates' *History*, a text which covers the period from 1118 to 1207 and recounts the dramatic sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders of the Fourth Crusade in 1204. Choniates himself features as one of

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2 Eco's engagement with the Middle Ages in his novels grows out of his scholarly expertise in this period. It is characteristic that his doctoral thesis was dedicated to the aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas, while he also made an in-depth investigation into the medieval themes of James Joyce's fiction: see U. Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. into English H. Bredin. Cambridge, MA 1988; U. Eco, *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce*, trans. into English E. Esrock. Cambridge, MA 1989. One of Eco's essays which exemplifies his approach to the Middle Ages is the *Dreaming of the Middle Ages*: U. Eco, *Dreaming of the Middle Ages*, in: *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. into English W. Weaver. New York 1986, 61-72. There, the author accounts for people's everlasting interest in medieval times and explores the range of popular conceptions of the Middle Ages. For a broad discussion on Eco's preoccupation with medieval times specifically in his novels, see T. Coletti, Eco's Middle Ages and the Historical Novel, in: P. Bondanella (ed.), *New Essays on Umberto Eco*. Cambridge 2009, 71-89, where (p. 74) it is noted that a striking feature of Eco's writing style is his attention to "most idiosyncratic elements of medieval life and culture".


4 For the edition of Choniates' historical account, see J.-L. van Dieten (ed.), *Nicetae Choniatae Historia* (*CFHB*, 11/1). Berlin 1975. General information about Niketas Choniates and his historical work can be found in: L. Neville, Niketas Choniates, in: *Guide *
the key characters in *Baudolino*. In an interview in *la Repubblica* in September 2000, Eco hailed Choniates as “un grande storico bizantino” (“a famous Byzantine historian”), who produced an almost direct record of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.\(^5\) Notably, *Baudolino* was the subject of a recent podcast in the Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Podcast Series, with the participation of Alessandra Bucossi and Alberto Ravani.\(^6\) The two scholars discussed the representation of Byzantium, and of the medieval world in general, in Eco’s novel, and brought to the fore elements of intertextuality between *Baudolino* and Choniates’ *History*. The appearance of Choniates as a character in *Baudolino* has been analysed in an article by Maria Sgouridou, who focused more on the portrayal of the fictional Choniates and less on its connection to the real historian,\(^7\) and is also briefly referred to in a study by Alicia Simpson.\(^8\)

As the last few years have witnessed a broader upsurge of interest in the reception of Byzantine literature and civilisation in various forms of Modern European culture,\(^9\) it is worth looking more closely into Eco’s use of Choniates’

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6 A. Stavrakopoulou (host), *Baudolino* with Prof. Alessandra Bucossi and Alberto Ravani (Episode 6) [Audio podcast episode], in: Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Podcast Series. 11 February 2021, available at: https://www.doaks.org/research/byzantine/podcast/episode-6-baudolino.


History. It is, after all, extremely uncommon to find a world-renowned, widely translated novelist who consults a Byzantine source in composing his work.\textsuperscript{10} This article examines: first the material from the History that helped Eco sketch the profile and develop the story of the fictional Choniates; secondly Eco’s purposeful linguistic and literary borrowings from Choniates’ text. My aim is to show how, through the lens of a novelist, modern readers, whether specialists in Byzantine / Medieval Studies or not, can variously comprehend and assess an insightful, captivating Byzantine historian.

\textit{Choniates’ History and its translations}

Eco’s novel starts in Constantinople in April 1204, when the Crusaders plunder and destroy the Byzantine capital.\textsuperscript{11} At this crucial time, Baudolino, an Italian

\textsuperscript{10} In addition to using Choniates’ History as a source, in Baudolino, Eco seems to be aware of subjects that have long attracted scholarly attention in the field of Byzantine Studies. For example, we read that the gardens of Constantinople were not simply attractions of nature, but works of art: Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 26. This detail about the gardens of the Byzantine capital reflects discussions that were contemporary to Eco and relate to Byzantine garden culture. See, for instance, the following studies that had been published by 2000: A. R. Littlewood, Gardens of the Palaces, in: H. Maguire (ed.), Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204. Washington, D.C. 1997, 13-38; C. Barber, Reading Garden in Byzantium: Nature and Sexuality. \textit{BMGS} 16 (1992) 1-9. For more recent investigations into gardens in Byzantium, see V. Della Dora, Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium. Cambridge 2016, 93-117; H. Bodin – R. Hedlund (eds.), Byzantine Gardens and Beyond. Uppsala 2013. In addition, Eco attributes to the hero Choniates a short internal monologue, in which he outlines the curriculum of the Byzantine education and emphasises that one ought to be proficient in high-style Greek to enter imperial administration: Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 72. These statements clearly echo extensive, contemporary scholarly investigations into the Byzantine education system and its importance. Relevant indicative studies on this subject that had been published by 2000 include, for example: P. Agapitos, Teachers, Pupils and Imperial Power in Eleventh-Century Byzantium, in: Y. Lee Too – N. Livingstone (eds), Pedagogy and Power: Rhetorics of Classical Learning. Cambridge 1998, 170-191; P. Magdalino, The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143-1180. Cambridge 1993, 325-330; R. Browning, Literacy in the Byzantine World, \textit{BMGS} 4 (1978) 39-54; G. L. Kustas, Studies in Byzantine Rhetoric. Thessalonike 1973. For more recent investigations into the Byzantine education system, see A. Markopoulos, In Search for ‘Higher Education’ in Byzantium, \textit{ZRV} 50/51 (2013) 29-44; IDEM, Education, in: E. Jeffrey with J. Haldon and R. Cormack (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies. Oxford 2008, 785-795.

\textsuperscript{11} It is not surprising that Eco chose Constantinople as the setting for one of his novels, as he was fascinated with the city and its long history. This fascination is well illustrated in Eco’s foreword to the latest edition of \textit{Constantinople}, the late nineteenth-century travel book by the Italian novelist and journalist Edmondo De Amicis (b. 1846–d. 1908): E. De Amicis, Constantinople, New Edition, trans. into English S. Parking. Foreword
man who had been adopted by and served the German ruler Frederick Barbarossa (r. 1155–1190), finds himself in the city. Entering the looted church of Hagia Sophia, he saves a man who had sought refuge there from the Crusaders’ wrath. This man is Niketas Choniates, whom Baudolino remembers to have met a few years back as part of Frederick’s entourage when Choniates was an envoy of the emperor Isaac II Angelos (r. 1185–1195, 1203–1204). Offering shelter to Choniates, Baudolino, a lively storyteller and renowned liar, shares his incredible adventures with his new friend. His flashback account includes fabulous journeys to distant or legendary lands, such as Abkhazia (in South Caucasus) and the Kingdom of Prester John, and meetings with peculiar creatures, for example basilisks, unicorns, and giants. Real events and places in Baudolino’s narrative are closely intertwined with fables, the reliability of which are dubious, to say the least. In turn, Choniates offers Baudolino some background information about key political developments that have marked the recent history of Byzantium (particularly details about the succession of Byzantine emperors), also lamenting the terrible loss of Constantinople to the Latins. Baudolino continues recounting his story to Choniates as he escorts the Byzantine historian and his family to Selymbria where Choniates moves after the sack of the Byzantine capital. The novel concludes with Choniates deciding against inserting Baudolino’s account into his historical work, as he finds the veracity of his story highly questionable.

An important matter to consider at the beginning of this discussion is which text of Choniates’ *History* Eco read and used for different sections of *Baudolino*. An obvious supposition is that he knew of the translation of Choniates’ history into Italian by Anna Pontani, in which the translated text is placed side by side with the original. The first volume of this translation, which covers the reign of Manuel I Komnenos (r. 1143–1180), was published in 1994 and must certainly have been available to Eco. The second volume, which extends from the reign of Alexios II (r. 1180–1183), the son of Manuel, to the first reign of Isaac Angelos, came out in 1999 and could also have been known to and used by the writer. 

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Eco might even have requested and acquired a final draft of the second volume prior to its publication. The third and final volume of the Italian translation, which includes the conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders and its aftermath, was not available to the novelist, as it was published in 2014, many years after the publication of *Baudolino*.\(^{15}\) It seems likely to me that, in addition to the partial Italian translation of Choniates’ account, Eco might have consulted the English translation of Choniates’ work by Harry J. Magoulias, which came out in 1984.\(^{16}\) Magoulias translates Choniates’ work in full, including sections that furnished Eco with much material and had not been translated into Italian until then, namely the presentation of the Fourth Crusade and the historian’s extensive lamentations. In both the English and the Italian translation of the *History*, Eco would have found extensive, helpful introductions to Choniates’ background and career as well as information on the content of his historical account. Interestingly, a few words attributed to the hero Choniates in *Baudolino* echo a similar comment made by both Magoulias and Pontani in their translations of the *History*. In his work, Choniates mentions a location called Καταβατή as the burial place of the head of the assassinated young emperor Alexios II.\(^ {17}\) Commenting on this detail, Magoulias explains the etymology of the word Καταβατή as a “descending or steep part of the City” and notes that he cannot find the exact location of the Καταβατή district.\(^ {18}\) Along the same lines, Pontani observes that Καταβατή is a place not attested elsewhere.\(^ {19}\) Drawing on the *History*, Eco, too, notes that Katabate was where the head of Alexios II was buried. As Baudolino tells Choniates, *Katabate* was an underground cemetery with a network of catacombs.\(^ {20}\) Perhaps having read the comments by either or both translators of the *History*, Eco puts the words *ignoravo tutto sul cimitero di Katabate* (*I didn’t know anything about the Katabates cemetery*) in the mouth of the hero Choniates.\(^ {21}\) In addition, he might have taken some inspiration from Magoulias’ etymological explanation of Καταβατή and described the Katabate cemetery as being a place below ground.

As Eco knew classical Greek, one should also allow for the possibility that the novelist had read Choniates’ original Greek text and tried to translate or paraphrase some segments himself. Several textual indications in *Baudolino* point to

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17 Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 274.22-24.
18 City of Byzantium (cited n. 16), 390 (endnote 760).
19 Grandezza e catastrofe. Volume II (cited n. 14), 616 (endnote 328).
20 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 491.
21 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 491; Baudolino, trans. Weaver (cited n. 1), 486.
Eco’s consulting the original History and translating directly from it. Let us take a couple of examples from the lamentations uttered by the hero Choniates when he is full of despair and is saved by Baudolino in Hagia Sophia. Almost all segments in these lamentations are drawn from the History. Mourning, the hero Choniates turns directly to Constantinople and calls it guida delle perfette opinioni (guide of perfect opinions).22 This phrase is a close translation of ὀρθοδοξίας ποδηγέ, which refers to Constantinople in Choniates’ lament in the History.23 Eco was certainly aware of ὀρθοδοξία as a religious term but chose to analyse the word in its compound parts (ὀρθός + δοκῶ) and translate these parts freely. He did not take Magoulias’ translation of the History into account for this segment, as Magoulias translates ὀρθοδοξίας ποδηγέ as guide of orthodoxy.24 Another indication of Eco’s reading of the Greek text is a grammatical mistake he makes in translating and incorporating into the hero Choniates’ dirge the phrase τέκνων τῶν γνησίων χατίζουσα.25 This segment, which refers again to the Byzantine capital in Choniates’ lament, means and is translated by Magoulias as in need of true children.26 However, recognising χατίζουσα incorrectly as a form of the passive voice, Eco writes in his novel orbata dei tuoi figli (robbed of your children).27

The characters of Choniates and Baudolino

The History and its contents furnish Eco with abundant biographical material to help him establish the background of the hero Choniates and develop his story as the novel progresses. The hero Choniates is introduced and referred to right from the beginning as a storico di molti Comneni e degli Angeli (historian of many Comneni and Angelus emperors).28 This is an indirect, premature reference by Eco to the History, the oldest version of which is known to have been completed by the end of 1206 and which the hero Choniates himself contemplates composing at the end of Baudolino.29 Still, the novelist presents the hero’s fame as a writer of imperial history as an established feature of his background, thus emphasising early on how important his engagement with the recording of history is going to be in Baudolino. In addition, in the History we read that, as a high-level state

22 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 24; Baudolino, trans. Weaver (cited n. 1), 18.
23 Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 576.2-3.
24 City of Byzantium (cited. n. 16), 317.
26 City of Byzantium (cited. n. 16), 317.
27 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 24; Baudolino, trans. Weaver (cited n. 1), 18.
28 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 18; Baudolino, trans. Weaver (cited n. 1), 12.
29 For an investigation of the different versions of Choniates’ History and their dating, see Simpson, Study (cited n. 4), 68-77; A. Simpson, Before and After 1204: The Versions of Niketas Choniates’ Historia. DOP 60 (2006) 189-221.
official, Choniates accompanied the emperor Isaac Angelos in eastern Thrace in 1189–1190. There, he was involved in the negotiations held between the emperor and Frederick Barbarossa about the passage of the Crusaders of the Third Crusade through Byzantium on their way to Palestine.30 This experience of the historian inspired Eco to write about Baudolino’s first meeting with Choniates in Gallipoli during these negotiations.31 Other biographical pieces of information that are drawn from the *History* and make their appearance in Eco’s novel include, for instance: that the historian’s grand house was burnt in the fire set by the Crusaders of the Fourth Crusade in August 1203;32 that Choniates and his family fled to Selymbria after the sack of the Byzantine capital;33 that the refugees from Constantinople, including the Choniates family, were spurned by the local population there;34 that the historian returned to Constantinople for a short period of time;35 and, finally, that he decided to move to Nicaea in order to offer his services to Theodore I Laskaris (r. 1205–1221).36 Moreover, in *Baudolino* the hero Choniates reveals that, when he was in his twenties, he was appointed as a tax collector in Paphlagonia.37 What is interesting about this detail is that it is not present in the *History*. It is mentioned, however, in the introduction of both the English and the Italian translations of Choniates’ work, which makes it likely that Eco derived this information from either or both of these sources.38

Particularly worthy of note is that the historian’s recollections of how he was saved during the destruction of Constantinople provide the basis for Eco’s own presentation of how Baudolino managed to rescue the hero Choniates. From the *History* we learn that Choniates considered seeking refuge in Hagia Sophia, but understood that it would have been in vain as the Crusaders did not hesitate to attack even those who had sought asylum in a holy place. He was eventually helped by an anonymous Venetian-born friend, who wore armour and pretended to be a fellow soldier of the Crusaders. Speaking to the Crusaders in their own language, he prevented them from entering and searching the place where the Choniates family were hiding, and later led the family safely to a house belonging to some Venetian acquaintances. The historian and his family left the Byzantine

30 Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 409-412.
31 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 18.
32 Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 553-555, 587.5-6; Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 27.
33 Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 593; Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 27, 362.
34 Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 593-594; Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 362.
35 Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 635; Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 519.
36 Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 635; Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 519.
37 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 230.
38 City of Byzantium (cited n. 16), xii; Grandezza e catastrofe. Volume I (cited n. 13), XXIII.
capital a few days after that, on a Saturday. As mentioned earlier, in *Baudolino*, the hero Choniates does seek asylum in Hagia Sophia. When Baudolino bursts into the Great Church and saves Choniates, the attackers mistake him for one of their own, as he speaks in the language of Provence. He wears an outfit and a helmet that so closely resemble those of the Crusaders that even Choniates believes his saviour is a Crusader. As Baudolino explains, he stole his attire from a drunk horseman trying to pass as a Crusader soldier. He had feared the attackers were in such frenzy that they would not spare even a Westerner traveller. He then hides Choniates in the residence of some Genoese friends, where the rest of Choniates’ family are also brought. Eco even takes from Choniates’ historical narrative and slightly amends the minor detail about the day. It is said in *Baudolino* that, by Saturday morning, the situation in Constantinople was relatively safe and that the party of Choniates’ family, Baudolino and his friends needed a full day after that to leave the capital. At the end of the novel, Choniates is convinced by a friend to omit Baudolino’s incredible stories – and Baudolino himself – from his historical account, and to write only vaguely that he was rescued by certain Venetians. Here, Eco brilliantly plays with the concept of tampering with the recording of history. He presents the hero Choniates as purposely concealing Baudolino’s role from his audience in his rescue and attributing his actions to somebody else. This is precisely what Eco does in reverse: in twisting Choniates’ account of what he experienced during the sack of the City, the novelist ascribes the anonymous Venetian’s attempts to save Choniates to his fictional protagonist, Baudolino.

The historian’s personality and ideas, as reflected in his *History*, are a source of inspiration for Eco to draw the general profile of Choniates in *Baudolino*. For instance, Choniates’ belief in the workings of God’s Providence, which is prominent in his historical narrative, is reflected in fictional Choniates’ idea of history as a combination of various stories woven together by Divine Providence. The historian understands extraordinary, unnatural occurrences as omens predicting a bleak future; hence, he mentions the birth of a monster-like boy around the time of Manuel Komnenos’ death, an event taken to foretell the appearance of many

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39 This information can be found in: Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 588.
40 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 23.
41 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 28-29.
42 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 27.
43 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 212.
44 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 525.
45 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 17. For a discussion of Choniates’ understanding of the role of Divine Providence, see Simpson, Study (cited n. 4), 284-286.
claimants to the Byzantine throne.\footnote{Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 225.51-55.} In Baudolino too, fictional Choniates notes the event of this birth and interprets it in the same way, with Eco thus stressing the hero’s belief in and acceptance of portents.\footnote{Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 247. According to Eco, fictional characters in historical novels ought to be “representative of their period”: Eco, Dreaming (cited n. 2), 68. Indeed, in this case Choniates’ belief in God’s Providence and the role of omens is an attitude typical of a medieval man.} In the History, moreover, Choniates writes from a metropolitan point of view, inextricably linking the history of the Byzantine state with that of its capital city. The superiority of Constantinople over all other cities in the world is clearly expressed in the historian’s characterisations of the capital as the \textit{eye of all cities} and a \textit{universal boast}.\footnote{Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 576.1. The translation of these quotations can be found in: City of Byzantium (cited n. 16), 317.} Influenced perhaps by this attitude of Choniates, Eco composes a discussion between the hero Choniates and Baudolino, from which it is made clear that Choniates considers the Byzantine capital \textit{il centro dell’universo (the centre of the universe)}.\footnote{Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 37; Baudolino, trans. Weaver (cited n. 1), 31.}

Another interesting aspect of the historian’s ideology that is echoed in Baudolino concerns his \textit{Kaiserkritik}, his critical, and often openly disapproving, attitude towards an emperor’s behaviour and policies. Eco might have read Cavallo’s analysis of aspects of Choniates’ \textit{Kaiserkritik} that is found in the introduction to the Italian translation.\footnote{Grandezza e catastrofe. Volume I (cited n. 13), XXV-XXXIX.} In his novel, he summarises and puts into Choniates’ mouth the extensive criticism of Andronikos I Komnenos (r. 1183–1185) that is included in the History.\footnote{Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 251; Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 320.83-325.13. Some insights into Choniates’ assessment of Andronikos Komnenos are provided in: Urbainczyk, Writing (cited n. 4), 94-99.} For example, just like his historian counterpart, the hero Choniates accuses Andronikos of dismissing the great danger posed by the external enemies of the Empire, going on trips away from Constantinople with his lovers, and entertaining himself in the company of flute girls and prostitutes. In the History, Choniates recognised that Andronikos was not an altogether bad emperor, as he proceeded to perform several virtuous acts.\footnote{Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 329.39-331.91.} Eco follows the historian in his balanced assessment of Andronikos’ reign and therefore inserts into the hero Choniates’ evaluation of the Komnenian emperor some of the positive things he did, such as the lowering of taxation and the restoration of the old underground aqueduct. In the light of all these remarks, it seems that Eco patterns some personality traits of the hero Choniates on the characteristics and views of the real Choniates.
This conclusion is further confirmed if one observes how much Choniates’ musings and practices on the recording of the past influence Eco’s portrayal of Choniates as a historian. On a literary and linguistic level, this influence is manifest in Eco’s use of the metaphors that appear in Choniates’ prologue, where history is likened to a βίβλος ζώντων – a book of the living – and a σάλπιγξ περίτρανος – a clarion trumpet that raises the dead and presents them before the eyes of people who are interested in their story. Just like the real Choniates, the hero Choniates envisions and describes to Baudolino a historical account as a libro dei viventi (book of the living) and a trompa (trumpet), which raises from the tomb those that had become dust a long time ago. The novelist employs these metaphors because they nicely encapsulate the value of history, thus befitting the profile of the serious historian that Choniates represents in Baudolino; at the same time, they are striking and memorable. In addition, Eco might have received impetus from Choniates’ method of work in his History to compose passages indicative of the features of the hero Choniates as a historian. In the History, for example, we read that Choniates bases certain sections of his narrative, e.g. the reign of John II Komnenos (r. 1118–1143) and the Second Crusade, on oral testimonies and rumours that circulated. Particularly for the reign of John Komnenos, of which Choniates has no personal knowledge, he claims to have heard the accounts of people who were close to the emperor. Likewise, in Baudolino the fictional Choniates is said to enjoy listening to people’s accounts of events he ignores. Throughout his historical work, the real Choniates also tried to assess the policies and character of Byzantine emperors, making critical remarks even about those he served as a statesman. In a statement mirroring this attitude, the hero Choniates explains to Baudolino that a historian can record the deeds of the rulers of his own state without giving up his severità (severity), clarifying to his readers why and in what way rulers are led to their ruin. These last couple of examples from Baudolino (and their affinity to aspects of the History) suggest that Eco had a good overall understanding of the qualities of Choniates as a historian.

To make his fictional personae more realistic, the Italian novelist imaginatively expands on minor details from the History or creatively enriches a character’s

53 Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 2.20-21. The translation of these quotations are from: City of Byzantium (cited n. 16), 3.
54 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 17, 18 respectively; Baudolino, trans. Weaver (cited n. 1), 12.
55 Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 4.76-81, 10.52, 12.88, 66.32-33, 71. For some information on Choniates’ oral sources, see Simpson, Study (cited n. 4), 242-247.
56 Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 4.76-81.
57 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 18.
58 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 45; Baudolino, trans. Weaver (cited n. 1), 39.
profile. The depiction of the Choniates family in *Baudolino* is telling in this regard. For example, an interesting detail in the *History* about Choniates’ daughters, who fled along with him from Constantinople, is that they had been told to cover their faces with mud, so that they would look unappealing to any men they might come across as they left the capital. Choniates does not say anything about the girls’ response to this request. Drawing on this passage of the *History*, the novelist, too, writes that the girls are instructed by the Genoese who hide the Choniates family to stain their faces with dirt. In *Baudolino*, the Choniates girls are said to cry and are reluctant to taint their appearance, a reaction which befits women of their station who would be accustomed to having a neat and polished appearance. This addition by Eco to Choniates’ text makes the figures of the girls, who (just as in the *History*) remain “silent” throughout *Baudolino*, more believable in the eyes of a modern reader.

Concerning the historian himself, Eco is receptive of and builds on Choniates’ self-awareness as a member of the highest echelons of Byzantine society, an aspect of his image that is well-illustrated in the *History*. To paint the picture of Choniates as a prominent Byzantine aristocrat, Eco composes various short scenes that are indicative of the hero’s opulent background, such as the one in which Choniates sends for a barber to cleane and shave his face while Constantinople is still at the Crusaders’ mercy. The numerous scenes throughout the novel in which Choniates enjoys and shares rich meals – proper to a logothete – with Baudolino are also indicative of the wealthy lifestyle to which the real Choniates would have been accustomed. Eco’s interest in writing scenes related to food does not seem random. I share Bucossi’s opinion that the novelist might have derived some inspiration from the many extracts about food and wine that we find in the *History*.

Eco not only draws on Choniates’ historical writing to paint the picture of the fictional Choniates, but also of the central Latin protagonist of his novel, Baudolino. As Baudolino tries to find a hiding place during the sack of the Byzantine capital (before he saves the hero Choniates), he witnesses the destruction of the impressive statues of Constantinople. He later recounts what he witnessed to Choniates, with Eco including at this point numerous details from Choniates’ *On Statues*, a short treatise appended to the *History* concerning the artworks that

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59 Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 589.56-59.
60 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 235.
61 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 56.
62 See, for instance: Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 43, 105, 275, 462.
63 Stavrakopoulou (host), Baudolino with Prof. Alessandra Bucossi and Alberto Ravani (cited n. 6).
had adorned Constantinople and which had been damaged during the Fourth Crusade. According to Choniates, not even the statue of Helen of Troy, which was able to bewitch any onlooker, was saved from the Crusaders’ wrath. As we read in On Statues, it was made of bronze, with open lips as if the statue were about to talk to the spectator, a graceful smile, hair as if blowing in the wind, and a well-shaped body. In Eco’s novel, the statue of Helen is said to have a similar effect on Baudolino as the one described in Choniates’ narrative: Baudolino goes to gaze upon the statue in the early days of his arrival at the capital. He repeats many details about the beautiful features of the statue, saying in a more novel-esque manner that Helen’s hair *che danzavano al vento* (*danced […] in the wind*), before revealing to Choniates that the artwork had been violently pulled down.

From Choniates’ treatise, Eco derives information about many other statues; Baudolino recalls, for example, the destruction of the Sphinx, Hercules and the she-wolf that fed Romulus and Remus, expressing his abhorrence and indignation for the loss of such treasures. The novelist’s choice to put this information about the statues of Constantinople in Baudolino’s mouth serves to illustrate the hero’s curiosity about foreign cultures, which fits his profile as an adventurous traveller, and serves also to stress the antithesis between Baudolino, who showed a genuine interest in the artworks of the Byzantine capital, and the Latins of the Fourth Crusade, who furiously destroy them.

Overall, making use of material from the History, Eco draws the portraits of Choniates and Baudolino, presenting the two characters as opposite to one another in many respects. Just like the real Choniates, the fictional Choniates is a reliable and careful historian and a distinguished member of the Byzantine nobility, for whom the capital of his state is preeminent in the world. In contrast, Baudolino is the narrator of fantastic accounts and tales and a Westerner of humble origins who explores and appreciates foreign lands.

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65 Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 652.58-653.4.

66 Detailed information about various statues described in Choniates’ *On Statues* can be found in: A. Berger, The Statues of Constantinople. Cambridge 2021. Details specifically about the statue of Helen are provided in pages 63–64 of the book.

67 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 29.

68 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 29; Baudolino, trans. Weaver (cited n. 1), 23.

69 Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 30.
The sack of Constantinople and Choniates’ laments

Choniates’ graphic narrative of the sack of Constantinople had a strong literary and linguistic influence in Eco’s own presentation of this event. In Baudolino, hiding along with Baudolino from the Crusaders in a tower, Choniates overlooks the disastrous fire that burns Constantinople and recalls what has happened up to that point during the conquest of the capital.\(^{70}\) To compose this flashback narrative, Eco draws heavily on the History. He derives from the historian’s account the information that the Crusaders were expecting some form of resistance upon entering the city and that the local population greeted them in a procession with icons and crosses, hoping thus to placate them.\(^{71}\) Minor details that make Choniates’ historical narrative particularly vivid, such as the frenzied look of the Crusaders and their horses which were roused to fight,\(^{72}\) catch the attention of Eco, who inserts them into his own text. In Baudolino, we also find numerous details from the historian’s picturesque account of the looting of churches, particularly Hagia Sophia.\(^{73}\) For instance, Eco repeats Choniates’ bold characterisation of the plunderers as *avanguardia dell’Anticristo* (*that vanguard of the Antichrist*).\(^{74}\) He draws on the striking scenes of soldiers pushing and piercing animals with knives to reach the sanctuary of Hagia Sophia; of the floor of the Great Church stained with the animals’ blood and excrement; and of a naked prostitute dancing on the altar and collapsing on the patriarchal throne.\(^{75}\) The fact that the novelist incorporates particularly impressive short pieces of information, phrases, and images related to the catastrophe of the Byzantine capital in his work makes it clear that he appreciates Choniates’ ability to create a lively narrative and highly dramatic, memorable scenes.

Eco’s acknowledgement of Choniates as a compelling author is further highlighted if one considers how closely the Italian writer copies or paraphrases sections of Choniates’ laments, which are among the most rhetorical and ornate pieces in the entire History. Let us compare the following lamenting extract from the History to the corresponding lament attributed to the hero Choniates, in Baudolino.

Χριστὲ βασιλεῦ τῆς τότε θλίψεως καὶ συνοχῆς τῶν ἀνθρώπων. ὁ δ’ ἦχος ὁ θα-

\(^{70}\) Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 19-20.
\(^{71}\) Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 20-21; Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 572.79-573.92.
\(^{72}\) Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 21; Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 572.87, 573.91-92 respectively.
\(^{73}\) Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 21-22; Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 573.93-574.32.
\(^{74}\) Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 22; Baudolino, trans. Weaver (cited n. 1), 16. The quotation in the Greek text is οἱ τοῦ Αντιχρίστου πρόδρομοι: Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 573.7.
\(^{75}\) Eco, Baudolino (cited n. 1), 22; Choniates, Historia (cited n. 4), 574.23-574.32.
Following Choniates, Eco begins the first period (O Cristo...nostre!) of this short lament by making a direct address to God, translating Χριστὲ βασιλεῦ of the original as Cristo Signore, an exclamation that is slightly more familiar to a modern reader than the literal Cristo re would be. He continues by expressing sorrow for the misfortunes that have befallen the Byzantines, employing, just as the historian did in the original text, two synonyms (le angustie, le tribolazioni, τῆς [...] θλίψεως, συνοχῆς). In the second period of the lament (Ma come ... sventura?), copying Choniates again, the novelist splits the subjects of the period into four staccato clauses with the use of the asyndeton figure; as in the Greek text, each of these clauses refers to the natural (or unnatural) phenomena that could have foretold the pending tribulations. Eco either faithfully translates the original, as in ὁ δὲ τοῦ ἡλίου σκοτασμὸς καὶ ἡ ζόφωσις / l’offuscamento o la totale oscurità del sole, or freely paraphrases Choniates’ text, as in ἡ δὲ τῆς σελήνης εἰς αἷμα μεταστροφή / il rosso alone della luna. The fact that Eco repeats Choniates’ structural arrangement of these clauses indicates that he recognises how the historian tried to make the theme of natural phenomena as signs predicting the future more emphatic and forceful using the asyndeton.

Another lament in Baudolino that is very similar in content and style to Choniates’ historical account is the one uttered by the hero Choniates at the time when Baudolino rescues him from the Crusaders. In this lament of the hero Choniates, Eco selects and combines notable excerpts from the most extensive lament in the History. He is inspired by the impressive exclamatory sentence with which Choniates introduces his lament: Ὡ πόλις, πόλις [...] ἐκκλησιῶν γαλουχέ, πίστεως ἀρχηγέ, ὀρθοδοξίας ποδηγέ, λόγων μέλημα, καλοῦ παντός...
The Reception of Niketas Choniates’ *History* in Umberto Eco’s *Baudolino* 225

ἐνδιαίτημα,80 translating and paraphrasing this sentence as *O Costantinopoli, Costantinopoli, madre delle chiese, principessa della religione, guida delle perfette opinioni, nutrice di tutte le scienze, riposo di ogni bellezza.*81 As was observed in the previous example, here too, Eco translates certain segments quite faithfully (for instance καλοῦ παντὸς ἐνδιαίτημα / riposo di ogni bellezza), while translating others more freely, in a novelesque manner (for example ἀρχηγέ / principessa).

Once again, he retains the structure of the original, apparently acknowledging how the accumulation of short clauses in Choniates’ text stresses the importance of the capital of Byzantium. Some of the historian’s most striking metaphors in his lament attract Eco’s attention and are included in the hero Choniates’ dirge, for instance, the likening of the Crusaders to hateful suitors and to envious demons launching an assault on the city. Interestingly, Eco slightly amends one of Choniates’ metaphors, adapting it to the current circumstances of the hero Choniates, who is in hiding and seeks to flee; in the *History*, the exiled inhabitants of Constantinople are likened to birds flying around their captured mother, whereas in *Baudolino* the hero Choniates describes himself and his compatriots as captivated birds that cannot find a way out of the city. A highly memorable set of antithetical images in Choniates’ lament also makes its appearance in this section of *Baudolino*: in both texts, Constantinople personified is presented as having formerly been dressed in her royal garments, but now as dirty and squalid. In all, Eco seems to comprehend that, by enriching his text with a variety of metaphors and images, Choniates enabled his audience to imagine this lament being performed before their eyes. Eco evidently wishes the hero Choniates’ lament to have a similar effect on the readers of his novel.

**Conclusions**

*Baudolino* is a rare case study of a contemporary, widely-known novel in which elements of the plot, features of key characters, and even linguistic and stylistic choices are, to some extent, based on the work of a remarkable Byzantine historian. It is significant that, in studying Choniates’ *History* to compose his novel, Eco tried to approach and evaluate Choniates as a Byzantine man, as a medieval historian, and as the author of a literary account. Sketching Choniates’ profile as a Byzantine high-level statesman, he brings to the fore the affluent lifestyle that Choniates (and his family) must have lived. Inspired by Choniates’ own ideas and

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80 *City of Byzantium* (cited n. 16), 317: *O City, City, eye of all cities, […] wet nurse of churches, leader of the faith, guide of Orthodoxy, beloved topic of orations, the abode of every good thing!*

81 *Baudolino*, trans. *Weaver* (cited n. 1), 18: *O Constantinople, Constantinople! Mother of churches, princess of religion, guide of perfect opinions, nurse of all learning …*
practices in the writing of history, he presents the fictional Choniates as a historian with a rigorous methodology who takes into account eyewitness testimonies and attempts to offer to his readers a balanced assessment of contemporary rulers. Still, the hero Choniates is a man of his time; as a medieval man, he believes that the workings of Divine Providence can change the course of human affairs and that unnatural occurrences are omens foretelling the future. What is also particularly impressive is how a modern novelist such as Eco enthusiastically embraces Choniates’ rhetorical and literary style. He is keen on translating either almost verbatim or freely, as well as more poetically, paraphrasing the Byzantine historian’s text and apparently admiring Choniates’ competence in creating scenes of heightened drama or more extensive rhetorical pieces, such as his laments, which enliven the *History*. Thus, by acknowledging the performative (or theatrical, in modern terms) qualities of Choniates’ narrative, Eco essentially invites modern readers and scholars to pay tribute to Choniates not only as a remarkable historian, but also as a storyteller just as gifted as Eco’s fictional protagonist Baudolino.

School of History and Cultures
University of Birmingham

Abstract

Umberto Eco’s *Baudolino*, a novel published in 2000, draws on one of the most important historical accounts to have come down to us from the Byzantine period: Niketas Choniates’ *History*. Choniates himself features as one of the key characters in the novel. The *History* and its contents furnish Eco with abundant biographical material to help him establish the background of the hero Choniates and develop his story. The historian’s personality and ideas, as reflected in his *History*, as well as his musings and practices on the recording of the past are also a source of inspiration for Eco. It is noteworthy that the Italian novelist enthusiastically embraces Choniates’ rhetorical and literary style. He translates almost verbatim or freely paraphrases the Byzantine historian’s text, in addition to enriching his novel with a variety of metaphors and images taken from Choniates’ laments. Eco acknowledges the performative qualities of Choniates’ narrative, essentially inviting modern readers and scholars to pay tribute to Choniates not only as a remarkable historian, but also as a gifted storyteller.