This article analyzes two instances where Byzantine historians Anna Komnene and Nikephoros Gregoras used a syntagm about intimate and dedicated friendship between two ancient Greek mythological heroes, Orestes and Pylades. In The Alexiad it is a story about the brotherly relations between Alexios and Isaac Komnenoi, and in the Roman Histories Nikephoros Gregoras compares them to two contemporary rulers, two very close allies — the Byzantine emperor John Kantakouzenos and the Seljuk emir Umur. In both instances Byzantine writers very skillfully employed the metaphor about the friendship of Orestes and Pylades.

In his classic and today generally accepted definition of the Byzantine civilization, almost seventy years ago, George Ostrogorsky emphasized three main elements that determined the historical phenomenon of the Byzantine Empire. Those were the Roman state framework, Greek culture and the Christian faith. Byzantium would be inconceivable without any of those three cornerstones. It is only through this synthesis that Byzantium came into being. It has been well known that, spiritually, Byzantium was a medieval continuation of the Hellenic spirit.

Byzantine literature was, to a great extent, a continuation of Hellenic and Hellenistic writings. That evidently applies to Byzantine historiography. As a genre of multifaceted literature, Byzantine historical writing was a natural stage in the development of Ancient Greek historical thinking, a continuation of the pragmatic Greek historiography. That continuity was more than two millennia long. It had its roots in


3 ODB, II, 937–938 (A. P. Kazhdan).
the Greek historical writings of the fifth century B.C., and represented a spiritual vertical stemming from Herodotus, the father of history, and especially Thucydides, the greatest ancient historian and the greatest role model for Byzantine historians. At its other end, that almost uninterrupted thread reached the end of the sixteenth century A.D., and so called “The Chronicle of the Turkish Sultans”, which was one of the last works of Byzantine, and Greek historiography.4

Bearing this in mind, it is no wonder that Byzantine literates very often reminisce Ancient Greek history and mythology. Most commonly these are allusions to and loanwords from Homer, but also from the works of many others, like Hesiod, Aesop, Aristophanes, or Plutarch. One of those reminiscences refers to Orestes and Pylades, two heroes of Ancient Greek mythology, whose adventures symbolized a true and dedicated friendship.

Orestes, a member of the doomed house of Atreus, was a son of Agammenon, the king of Mycenae, and Clytemnestra. He had three sisters, Iphigenia, Electra, and Chrysothemis. He was born on the eve of the Trojan War, and spent his childhood days in the safety of his parent’s home.5 His life was shattered when his father returned home after ten years of fighting the Trojans. Orestes was an eye witness to a horrible crime. Clytemnestra and her lover Aeghistus, Agamemnon’s cousin, murdered the king and Cassandra, the concubine he brought over from Troy. Orestes himself barely escaped his mother’s ire. He was sent to the court of his uncle, Strophius, the king of Phocis. There he grew up with Pylades, the son of Strophius and Anaxibia. Two young boys became very close friends. Later in life Pylades became Orestes’ inseparable companion.6 They returned to Argos where Orestes, with the help of his sister Electra, avenged their father by killing both their mother Clytemnestra and Aeghistus. Their real predicaments were just to begin, however, but Orestes and Pylades braved all the perils and temptations together. When they finally weathered all the storms, Orestes offered the hand of his sister Electra to Pylades, and they had two children together, Strophius and Medontes.7

Byzantine authors, educated in Ancient Greek tradition, were familiar with the story of Orestes and Pylades. Some among them used this story of friendship which could overcome all hardships as a metaphor in their own writings. In this small contribution we shall analyze how two Byzantine historians in their own works use the story of two mythological friends and their enduring friendship. The historical writings of Anna Komnene and Nikephoros Gregoras belong to the very finest in

6 Ibidem, 341–342.
7 Ibidem, 342.
Byzantine historiography. At the same time, they were both exquisite intellectuals, by all means among the most educated Byzantines.

Anna Komnene, a daughter of emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118) and Empress Irene Doukaina, was born in 1083, and passed away in 1153 or 1154.8 The Alexiad, a masterpiece of Byzantine literature depicting her father’s rule,9 was written in quiet retirement of a mid twelfth century Constantinopolitan monastery.

In her historical work, the learned princess compares the relationship between brothers Isaac and Alexios Komnenos to Orestes and Pylades’ friendship. Anna Komnene wrote that her uncle Isaac was an exceptionally noble man, both in his words and his deeds, and as such very much alike her father Alexios. Isaac Komnenos always took extraordinary care of his younger brother. Anna noted that, according to legend, Orestes and Pylades were said to be so exceptional and affectionate friends that in the midst of a battle each would ignore the enemy soldiers attacking himself and hurried to other’s aid, protecting him with his own breast from enemy arrows.10 What we know about Isaac and Alexios confirms their close relationship.11 In April of 1081, after he had become Emperor, Alexios Komnenos, as a token of his gratitude to his elder brother who forfeited his rights to the throne awarded Isaac a newly introduced title of sebastokrator. This newly introduced title, second in rank only to Emperor, pushed the old title of caesar to the third place in Byzantine hierarchy. Alexios I promised the very title of kaisar to his son in law Nikephoros Melissinos, who relinquished his ambitions for the imperial throne in midst of the civil war. That was the reason why the new basileus had to honor his brother with a higher rank. He simply created a completely new title and introduced it at the top of the official list of ranks.12 However, despite all the evidence about brotherly love of two Komnenoi, Anna Komnene herself narrated that there were occasional misunderstandings between Isaac and Alexios and that their relations were by no means perfect.13

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12 Е. Ферянчић, Севастократи у Византији, Зборник радова Византолошког института, 11 (1968) 141–143.

13 J. Ljubarskij indicated that in the notes to his translation of “The Alexiad”. See Анна Комнина, Алексида, Вступительная статья, перевод и комментарий Я. Н. Любарского, Москва 1965, 470 p. 246.
Nikephoros Gregoras, a great fourteenth century historian, among his many literary tools used the syntagm about the friendship between two heroes of Ancient Greek mythology. In his *Roman Histories*, writing about Byzantine emperor John VI Kantakouzenos (1347–1354) and Umur (1334–1348), emir or Ayidin, Gregoras compared their relations to close friendship of Orestes and Pylades. Byzantine polyhistor always wrote about the Seljuk ruler laudatory, using carefully chosen words. However, despite all the panegyrics for Umur pasha, the Byzantine historian could not hide a certain malevolence towards the Byzantine emperor. It is well known that John Kantakouzenos was often accused of having brought the Turks to Europe. These accusations were based on the fact that during the civil war (1341–1347) he relied on military aid of Ayidin emir Umur, and later of the Ottoman bey Orhan (1326–1362).

Umur did help Byzantium on several occasions. Especially important was his military campaign against Albanians in 1338. He readily accepted John Kantakouzenos’ invitation and, commanding a large army, appeared in Thrace at the beginning of 1343. Byzantine civil war was raging and Kantakouzenos planned to use the Turks to boost his military strength and to alleviate the position of Didimotichon. The usurper’s wife and daughters were inside the city which was besieged by the troops loyal to Constantinopolitan regency. Although that Seljuk expedition did not last long, most likely cut short by severe winter weather, it did significantly help Kantakouzenos. In following years the Byzantine usurper could not rely on ready Seljuk help. A new crusade in 1344 put the emirate of Aydin on defense. The fate of Smyrna was especially troublesome. Umur pasha was killed in one of those clashes in 1348. However, Kantakouzenos’ muslim ally was still able to occasionally supply troops. His detachments were active in Europe in 1343, 1345, and 1346. Even in the spring of 1348 the emir of Aydin was ready to come to aid of his friend, at time already emperor, John VI Kantakouzenos in his planned campaign against the Serbian Emperor Stefan Dušan.

On the other hand, John Kantakouzenos magnanimously returned favors to his muslim friend. He sent a letter to Umur warning him about the impending crusade against Smyrna, Aydin’s main naval base. Pope Clement VI (1342–1352) was orga-
nizing the campaign under the veil of secrecy. The letter reached Umur Pasha's court when it was already too late.\(^{21}\)

John VI Kantakouzenos himself described his relations with Umur. In his memoirs, written after he left the throne and retired to monastery, emperor turned historian, among other things, emphasized that whenever they met Umur always paid him exceptional respect. The emir of Ayidin would dismount his horse, approach John Kantakouzenos on foot and gave him proskynesis.\(^{22}\)

In these two episodes narrated in their historical writings, Anna Komnene and Nikephoros Gregoras used the syntagm of unbreakable friendship between Ancient Greek mythological heroes Orestes and Pylades. In *The Alexiad* the metaphor was used to describe brotherly love between Isaac and Alexios Komnenoi. Their relations were not always perfect, but were, nevertheless, founded on mutual respect and devotion. Nikephoros Gregoras compared Orestes and Pylades to his contemporaries, two rulers and close allies, Byzantine emperor John VI Kantakouzenos and Seljuk emir Umur. There is a touch of malevolence and irony, though, in Gregoras metaphor. Be that as it may, both Anna Komnene and Nikephoros Gregoras in their historiographical writings very skillfully used the metaphor of Orestes and Pylades friendship.

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\(^{22}\) Ioannis Cantacuzeni eximperatoris historiarum, I–IV, ed. *L. Shopeni*, II, Bonnæ 1831, 393.