



## Summary :

Historian and official of the late Byzantine Era. He served as a governor of Imbros Island. In addition to his theological works, he wrote a historical work, which is called by subsequent scholars *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*. This work covers the events from 1451 to 1467 and is divided into five books. It recounts Mehmed's (1451-1481) military campaigns against the Aegean and the Ionian Islands, and against the Balkan Peninsula. Historians of the Antiquity, such as Thucydides and Flavius Josephus, had great influence on Kritovoulos.

## Other Names

Kritoboulos, Michael, Critobulus (Latinized), Kritovoulos the Islander, Kritovoulos of Imbros, Critobulus Imbriota

## Date and Place of Birth

1410, Imbros (Gökçeada)

## Date and Place of Death

1470, Constantinople (Istanbul)

## Main Role

Historian, Scholar, Official

## 1. His Life

Michail Kritovoulos was a distinguished historian, scholar and official during the late Byzantine Era. He was also known as Kritovoulos of Imvros (Gökçeada) or Kritovoulos the Islander (Critobulus Imbriota). He was born around 1410 and died around 1470, possibly in [Constantinople](#) (Istanbul). Not much is known about his life. He came from a wealthy aristocratic family of Imvros. He was well educated, possibly in [Constantinople](#), according to the account of [Gennadios Scholarios](#), who was the first Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople after its conquest by the Ottomans. The figure of Kritovoulos exists also in the work of the Italian merchant, scholar and antiquarian, Cyriacus of Ancona, who, giving an account of his visit to Imvros Island in 1444 refers to their meeting.<sup>1</sup> From Kritovoulos' work, we learn that he spent most of his life on Imvros.

After [1453](#), some of the eminent inhabitants of the island abandoned their island seeking refuge from the increasing pressure and the aspirations of the Italian naval democracies towards the islands of the Aegean. Kritovoulos was put in charge of all those willing to recognize the power of [Mehmed II the Conqueror](#) (1451-1481), because they were opposed to the Latin approach from the West. In 1456, the Ottoman sultan appointed Kritovoulos as the governor of Imvros. In the contemporary historiography there is mention that Kritovoulos served also as personal secretary under Mehmed the Conqueror, but there is no solid proof in favor of this argument.<sup>2</sup> As a governor under the sultan, he contributed to the submission of [Limnos Island](#) to the Ottomans. Ten years later, he fled to Constantinople, as a result of the Venetian conquest of Imbros and the surrounding islands, Thasos and Samothraki. In 1467, he witnessed one of the many plague outbreaks in Constantinople. The scholar describes the symptoms and the emergence of the disease with medical accuracy in his *History*. He died soon after that.

## 2. His Work

Kritovoulos wrote the *History of Mehmed the Conqueror* (Critobuli Imbriota, *Historiae* or *History*), in which he gives a detailed account of the conquest of the Balkans. The Rumanian historian V. Grecu gave the title *Life of Mehmed II* to Kritoboulos' *History*. The scholar also wrote some theological works.<sup>3</sup>

The *History* contains five books and covers the events of 1451-1467. For many years, Kritovoulos' *History* was considered a eulogy for Mehmed II, written under the Ottoman sultan's order. Kritovoulos is "Mehmed's apologist" for F. Babinger.<sup>4</sup> However, apologetics in Byzantine literature require from the author a definitive glorifying style, which is absent in Kritovoulos' *History*.



The only surviving Kritovoulos' *History* manuscript, written by himself, was revealed in 1859 in the Library of Topkapi Palace (Topkapı sarayı). The paper is of Venetian origin and the watermarks on it are proof that the work was possibly completed between 1465 and 1467. The resurfacing of the *History* is owed to C. Tischendorf, a German scholar. The text was first published in Paris in the *Fragmenta Historicum Graecorum* V 1, in 1870. Two critical editions of the work were published by V. Grecu and D. Reinsch, in 1963 and in 1983 respectively.<sup>5</sup> The *History of Mehmed the Conqueror* has been translated into English, German, Romanian, Turkish, and Bulgarian among other languages.<sup>6</sup>

The *History of Mehmed the Conqueror* starts with a letter by Kritovoulos addressed to Mehmed himself. In this letter, Kritovoulos explains the purpose of the book; he mentions the events that he will summarize in his account and the reasons that motivated him to write. It remains unclear whether this letter proves that the *History* was written under commission by Mehmed or it is just a result of an intricate and ornate writing style. In this letter that takes the place of an introduction, Kritovoulos asks his fellow-countrymen not to judge him for describing their misery, since he would never wish his people to forget it. The book's content is divided into five parts; each of the first four covers the events of three years, while the fifth covers four years. The work's main theme is the reign of sultan Mehmed II. The first part narrates his ascension to the throne, the siege and the conquest of the Byzantine capital, Constantinople. The second part covers the sultan's campaigns in the Balkans, the Ottoman conquest of Serbia and the fate of the islands of Limnos, Thasos and Samothraki. The third book describes the Ottoman campaigns in the Peloponnese and the land of the Illyrians (Albania). The fourth book gives an account of the [conquest of Trebizond](#) and [Lesvos Island](#), and of the campaigns against Bosnia and Wallachia. The last part of Kritovoulos' *History* recounts the further campaigns against Bosnia and the land of the Illyrians, as well as the battles against the Venetians in the Peloponnese.

Kritovoulos used a variety of sources: Ottoman documents, accounts of eyewitnesses, personal remarks and some older works.

Worthy to mention are the pains that Kritovoulos takes to disengage himself from the events that he narrates, in order to maintain his objectivity. When it comes to events he was involved in himself, he uses the third person to refer to him. There is almost no mention of either Christianity or Islam. Kritovoulos also avoids using terms that Byzantines of the time would fail to understand. The Ottoman ruler is more often called "king" or "satrap" than "sultan" or any other term of Ottoman derivation. According to Kritovoulos, as read in chapter 1.8, the "reply of king Mehmed to the ambassadors (of Konstantinos)", "our" new ruler (we, Romans) must reign the Land of the Romans with peace and justice.<sup>7</sup> The Ottoman rule is not pictured as devastating for the Byzantines but as a rather "logical" historical continuity of the rise, domination and fall of nations.<sup>8</sup>

It is evident throughout the work that Kritovoulos was well familiar with ancient historiography. Describing himself, he believes that he continues the heritage of Flavius Josephus "who loved truth and knew well the course of history".<sup>9</sup> It is also evident that historians of the Antiquity, especially Thucydides but Herodotus, Xenophon and Arrian as well, had a great impact on Kritovoulos' *History*. Continuing the tradition of the Byzantine historiography, Kritovoulos uses the Greek language but with a writing style that resembles the language of the classical antiquity, especially when names of places are concerned. As a result, in his account, Albanians are Illyrians, Serbs are Triballi, Wallachians are Getae, and Hungarians are Paeonians. In his account there are no factual errors. Dates are calculated according to the Byzantine calendar. His narrative is governed by logic and his style is unadorned. The only part where he indulges to sentimentality is in the tragic description of the fate of the Byzantine capital and its people.

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1. Bodnar, E. – Mitchell, C., *Cyriacus of Ancona's journeys in the Propontis and the Northern Aegean 1444-1445* (Philadelphia 1976), pp. 35, 36.

2. Ангелов, Д., *Възход и залез на една империя* (София 1991), p. 427.

3. The *Speech on the Passion of Christ* among others. For more information on Kritovoulos' theological works, see Reinsch, D., "Kritobulos of Imbros – Learned Historian, Ottoman raya and Byzantine Patriot", *ZRVI* 40 (2003), p. 298.



4. Babinger, F., *Mahomet II le Conquérant et son temps 1432-1481* (Paris 1954), p. 132.
5. Critobul din Imbros, *Din domnia lui Mahomed al II-lea anii 1451-1467*, Grecu, V. (επιμ.), (Scriptores byzantini IV, Bucarest 1963)· *Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae*, Reinsch, D.R. (επιμ.), (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 22, Series Berolinensis, Berolini 1983).
6. Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, Riggs, C. (transl.), (Princeton – New Jersey 1954, new edition 1970); Reinsch, D., *Mehmet II. erobert Konstantinopel. Das Geschichtswerk des Kritobulos von Imbros, übersetzt, eingeleitet und erklärt* (Graz – Wien – Köln 1986); Critobul din Imbros, *Din domnia lui Mahomed al II-lea (1451-1467)*, Grecu, V. (transl.), (București 1963); Kritovoulos, *Istanbul'un Fethi* (Istanbul 2005); Критовул, *Животът и управлението на Мехмед II Ал-Фатих (Завоевателят)*, Ирина Радевска (transl.), (София 2004).
7. «εἴ γε βούλοισθε τῆν ν εἰ ρήνην ἄ γειν, εἰ μὴ που καὶ αὐ τοῖ τῆ ς διαβάσεως ταύτης εἴ ργειν ἡ μᾶ ς βούλοισθε», see *Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae*, Reinsch, D.R. (ed.), (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 22, Series Berolinensis, Berolini 1983), I, 8.5-5. See comments in Ангелов, В., *Българите и техните съседни на Балканите във византийската историопис от XV в.* (София 2007), p. 48.
8. His remarks on the historical role of the “mightier” nations are developed in more detail in the chapter “Request” (*paraitesis*) and before the chapter “Beginning of history” (*archi tis istorias*), see *Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae*, Reinsch, D.R. (ed.), (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 22, Series Berolinensis, Berolini 1983), I, 4, pp. 14-15.
9. «τοῦ το τοίνυν καὶ Ἰ ώσηπος ὁ Ἑβραῖ ος εἰ δῶ ς φιλαλήθης ὦν καὶ τοῖ ς πράγμασι καλῶ ς ἐ φιστῶ ν ἐ παινεῖ μὲ ν ἐ ν τῷ τῆ ς ἀ λώσεως βιβλίῳ τῆ ν Ῥωμαίων τύχην καὶ ἄ ρετῆ ν», see *Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae*, Reinsch, D.R. (ed.), (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 22, Series Berolinensis, Berolini 1983), I, 4, pp. 14-15.

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	<b>Вачкова В.</b> , "“История”-та на Критовул от Имброс или: Загадката на ромейския религиозно-политически патриотизъм", <i>История</i> , 1-2, 2003, 39-50
	<b>Radić R.</b> , "Bosnia in the Work of Critoboulos of Imbros", <i>Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta</i> , 43, 2006, 141-155
	<b>Reinsch D.</b> , "Kritobulos of Imbros – Learned Historian, Ottoman raya and Byzantine Patriot", <i>Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta</i> , 40, 2003, 297-313
	<b>Talbot A.M.</b> , "Kritoboulos, Michael", Kazhdan A. (ed.), <i>The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium</i> , vol. 2, New York – Oxford 1991, 1159
	"Критόπουλος Μιχαήλ, αρ. 13817", Trapp E. (ed.), <i>Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit</i> , vol. 6, Wien 1983

## Quotations

The beginning of the *History* by Kritovoulos of Imbros



περιέχει ήδη αρχήν τῆς βασιλείας Μεχέμετι μεγίστου αὐτοκράτορος καὶ πάροδον ἐς αὐτήν, ἔργα καὶ πράξεις αὐτοῦ τειχισμὸν τοῦ ἐν Βοσπόρῳ νέου φρουρίου πόλεμόν τε τῆς Κωνσταντινουπόλεως καὶ ἄλωσιν ταύτης, χρόνου πλήθος ἔτη τρία.

#### ΚΡΙΤΟΒΟΥΛΟΥ

σημείωσαι τὰς αἰτίας τῆς συγγραφῆς

Κριτόβουλος ὁ νησιώτης, τὰ πρῶτα τῶν Ἰμβριωτῶν, τὴν συγγραφὴν τήνδε ξυνέγραψε δικαίως μὴ πράγματα οὕτω μεγάλα καὶ θαυμαστά ἐφ' ἡμῶν γεγονότα μείναι ἀνήκουστα, ἀλλὰ συγγραφάμενος παραδοῦναι ταῖς μεθ' ἡμᾶς γενεαῖς, ὡς μήτε ἔργα γενναῖά τε καὶ ἀξιαφήγητα καὶ τῶν παλαιῶν λειπόμενα μηδενὸς τῷ χρόνῳ καλυφθέντα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἀφανισθεῖν μήτε οἱ γεγονότες ἐς ὕστερον τὰ μέγιστα ζημιωθεῖεν τοιαύτης ἀμοιρήσαντες ἱστορίας τε καὶ μαθήσεως, καὶ οἱ ταῦτα δὲ πράξαντες ἔχωσι τι μνημεῖον κάλλιστον εἰς τὸν ἔπειτα χρόνον τῆς σφῶν αὐτῶν ἀνδρίας καὶ ἀρετῆς ἐκ τῆσδε τῆς συγγραφῆς καὶ τῆς τῶν ἔργων ἀποδείξεως. ἐδόκει δέ μοι καὶ διὰ τόδε οὐχ ἥκιστα ἀναγκαῖα εἶναι ἡδε ἢ νῦν συγγραφῆ· τὰ μὲν γὰρ παλαιὰ τῶν ἔργων πρεσβύτατα ὄντα καὶ μέγιστα δυσπαράδεκτά πῶς εἰσι καὶ εἰς ἀκοὴν ἔρχεται μόγις τῷ χρόνῳ ὥσπερ γηράσκοντα καὶ διαπιστούμενα ἢ τῷ γε πολλῷ τῆς μνήμης συνεθισμῷ καὶ καταφρονεῖται· πᾶν γὰρ τὸ πλεονάζον ἐς κόρον ἤκει, κόρος δὲ ἀηδῖαν φέρει. τὰ δὲ δὴ νῦν καινὰ τε ὄντα καὶ προσεχῆ καὶ ὡς γνώριμα εὐπαράδεκτά τέ ἐστι καὶ κατέχεται καὶ ὡς προσεχῆ μᾶλλον θαυμάζεται, καὶ τοσοῦτ' μᾶλλον ὅσῳ καὶ μᾶλλον διαφέροντα ἢ καὶ τὴν πίστιν ἔχοντα τῷ σαφεῖ καὶ γνωρίμῳ χαιρόντων τε τῶν ἀνθρώπων ὡς τὰ πολλὰ τοῖς καινότεροις τῶν ἔργων καὶ τούτοις μᾶλλον ἐθελόντων ἐπεσθαι. διὰ ταῦτα δὴ καὶ ἕτερα τοιαῦτα ἀναγκαῖα μοι κατεφάνη εἶναι ἡδε ἢ συγγραφῆ· ἔργα τε γὰρ δὴ μεγάλα καὶ θαυμαστά ἐν τοῖς νῦν καιροῖς καὶ τάδε ἐπράχθη οἷα τὸ παλαιὸν ἐν Ἑλλήσει καὶ βαρβάροις, προσέτι δὲ καὶ Ῥωμαίοις, μεγίστην ἀπόδειξιν παρεχόμενα ἀρετῆς καὶ ἀνδρίας τῶν ἐπιφανεστάτων ἀνδρῶν ἀρχὴ τε κατελύθη μεγίστη δὴ καὶ πρεσβυτάτη ὧν ἴσμεν ἐν ὀλίγῳ χρόνῳ καταπολεμηθεῖσα ἢ τῶν Ῥωμαίων κινήσις τε μεγίστη δὴ πάντων γέγονεν αὐτὴ καὶ μεταβολὴ πραγμάτων οὐ τῶν τυχόντων. γράψω δὴ καθέκαστα ὡς ἐγένετο ἀκριβῶς τοὺς τε λόγους ξυναρμόζων τοῖς ἔργοις τὰ τε ἔργα μηδαμοῦ τῶν καιρῶν ἀποδιωτὰς ἐν τε τοῖς προσώποις καὶ τοῖς καιροῖς τὴν γιγνομένην τάξιν μετὰ τοῦ προσήκοντος σῶζων καὶ διὰ πάντων τάληθους πλεῖστον λόγον ποιούμενος.

*Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae*, Reinsch, D.R. (ed.), (*Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* 22, Series Berolinensis, Berolini 1983), I, 1.1-9 and I, 2.1-8.

#### Repairing of the walls and building of the Golden Fortress

ἔπειτα κελεύει τὰ κατερριφθέντα τοῦ τείχους παρὰ τῶν μηχανῶν τειχίζειν τε ἀσφαλῶς πάντα καί, ὅπῃ ἄλλη πεπονηκὸς ἦν τῷ χρόνῳ κατὰ τε γῆν καὶ θάλασσαν, ἀνορθοῦν. καταβάλλει δὲ καὶ θεμελίους τῶν βασιλείων ἀπολεξάμενος, ὅπερ ἔφην, τὸν πλεῖστον καὶ κάλλιστον χῶρον τῆς πόλεως. ἔτι δὲ κελεύει τειχίζειν καὶ φρούριον ἐρυμνὸν περιίπου τὴν Χρυσέαν, ἢ ποτε τῶν βασιλέων τὸ φρούριον ἦν, καὶ γίνεσθαι ταῦτα πάντα κατὰ σπουδὴν, ἐργάζεσθαι δὲ τοὺς αἰχμαλώτους Ῥωμαίους λαμβάνοντας τῆς ἡμέρας μισθὸν ἀνά νομισμάτων ἕξ ἢ καὶ πλείω. ἦν δὲ τοῦτο τρόπον τινὰ πρόνοια παρὰ τοῦ βασιλέως τοῖς αἰχμαλώτοις τοῦ τε διατρέφεσθαι καὶ τοῦ τὴν ἰδίαν ὠνὴν εὐποροῦντας ἐκ τούτου ἔχειν κατατίθεσθαι τοῖς σφῶν κυρίως καὶ ἐλευθέρους γινομένους κατοικεῖν ἐν τῇ Πόλει· οὐ μόνον δὲ ἀλλὰ καὶ φιλανθρωπία πολλὴ καὶ εὐποιία, προσέτι γε μὴν καὶ μεγαλοψυχία βασιλικῆ καὶ περὶ πάντας μὲν τοὺς ἄλλους ἀπλῶς, οὐχ ἥκιστα δὲ περὶ τοὺς αἰχμαλώτους τούτους ἐχρητο, ἐλεᾶν τε αὐτοὺς καὶ καθημέραν φιλοτίμως εὐεργετῶν. ἐξερχόμενος γὰρ τῶν βασιλείων πολλάκις καὶ κατὰ θέαν τὴν πόλιν περιῶν ἢ ἄλλως γέ πως, εἴ πού τις ἐνετύγχανε τούτων, εὐθὺς ἀνέχων τὸν ἵππον διεδίδου πᾶσι δαφυλῶς αὐτοχειρὶ καὶ ἀργυρίου νομίσματα καὶ χρυσοῦ πολλάκις· τοσοῦτος ἔλεος εἶχεν αὐτὸν τῶν ἀνδρῶν.

*Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae*, Reinsch, D.R. (ed.), (*Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* 22, Series Berolinensis, Berolini 1983), II, 1. 5-1. p. 90

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