Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

The End of Byzantium

Review Number:
1030
Publish date:
Tuesday, 1 February, 2011
Author:
Jonathan Harris
ISBN:
9780300117868
Date of Publication:
2010
Price:
£25.00
Pages:
336pp.
Publisher:
Yale University Press
Place of Publication:
New Haven, CT
Author:
Tonia Kiousopoulou
ISBN:
9789604351398
Date of Publication:
2007
Pages:
282pp.
Publisher:
Polis
Place of Publication:
Athens
Reviewer:
Michael Angold

The fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453 has always interested historians. It has produced one undoubted classic in the shape of Sir Steven Runciman?s *The Fall of Constantinople 1453*.(1) It was the tragic climax of the history of the Byzantine Empire, which provided some consolation for the humiliation of its decline, reduced as it was in its final years to little more than Constantinople itself. It was living on borrowed time, for Constantinople should have fallen to the Ottomans 50 years earlier and was only saved

by the chance intervention of the central Asia conqueror Tamerlane, who defeated the Ottomans at the battle of Ankara in 1402. The question has always been this: what did the Byzantines do with this new lease of life? The conventional response is that Manuel II Palaiologos (1391-1425) returned from self-imposed exile in the West and was able to restore a measure of soundness to the Byzantine state. However, his eldest son John VIII (1425?48) frittered away the opportunities thus created and another son Constantine XI (1448?53) was left to face the consequences. It is a *1066 and all that* reading of history, which has turned Manuel II into the last great Byzantine emperor, John VIII into a bad thing, and Constantine XI into a doomed hero. It is also a reading, which reflects the sources. Manuel II was a scholar in his own right and his letters constitute the last important example of Byzantine epistolography. He is the subject of a magisterial biography by John W. Barker (2) , which is very largely written out of the emperor?s own works, while Donald M. Nicol has immortalised Constantine XI.(3) Ivan Djuri? provides the only discordant note in his biography of John VIII (4) by forcing us to think again about this emperor: was he such a bad thing, after all? Biography has been one avenue used by modern historians to study the last half-century of Byzantium?s existence. In addition to the biographies of the three emperors, there are superlative studies of the two major intellectual figures of the time.(5) However, more influential has been a small book by Nicolas Oikonomides (6) , who drew attention to the similarities between late medieval Constantinople and the Italian city-states. Both boasted ruling elites, which supported themselves by commerce and business. This was an insight, which has stimulated work by K.-P. Matschke and N. Necipoglu, who have studied the business activities carried on in Constantinople in its final phase and have shown that in purely economic terms Byzantine Constantinople was perfectly viable. Greek merchants had a major role to play as intermediaries between the Italians and the Turks.

Kiousopoulou too takes Oikonomides?s insight as her starting point, but develops it in a novel and interesting way. She accepts that Byzantium had ceased in any recognisable way to be an Empire and had metamorphosed into a city-state and wonders how its government and political structure adapted to such a momentous change. She frames the problem rather cleverly around a scene described by the historian George Sphrantzes, where the Emperor Manuel II confided his misgivings about his son and successor John VIII. In the emperor?s opinion the latter wished to rule in traditional style as a *Basileus*, when what the times required was an *oikonomos* or steward. There has been plenty of discussion of what exactly the emperor meant, when he drew this contrast. The general thrust is, however, clear. It was Manuel II Palaiologos?s belief that an emperor should not involve himself in ambitious diplomacy abroad, but concentrate on domestic matters. Kiousopoulou would like to be more specific. It was essential to concentrate on domestic matters because of changes, which meant that the authority of the Byzantine emperor was restricted in ways reminiscent of that of the doge of Venice. Kiousopoulou reminds us that because the Byzantine Empire was soon to disappear did not mean that it had become a living fossil. She argues that in its last years it was evolving a much stronger Hellenic identity. It was a process cut short by the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans. It was nevertheless an important stage in the development of a modern Greek consciousness, even if it went into cold storage under the Ottomans.

Harris, by way of contrast, has no particular axe to grind. His main concern is to provide an overview of the last years of Byzantium, which is solidly founded on the sources and which treats the period from 1402 to 1453 for itself and very much on its own terms. I think this may be the first time that this has been attempted. Harris clearly has a general rather than a specialist audience in mind because he is very careful to give references to sources in translation. His book is lucid; extremely well written with an excellent array of quotes and spread of information. He provides in purely literary terms the best short account of the siege of Constantinople and its aftermath that I know. His unrivalled knowledge of the Greek *diaspora* in the West also gives his book an extra dimension. Harris provides perceptive comments on individual episodes, but eschews general interpretation and has nothing to say about recent historiography of the period. He appears to accept the received opinion that Manuel II Palaiologos did enough to give Byzantium a fair chance of survival, but this came to nothing because of his son John VIII?s overambitious foreign policy. However, his conclusion suggests something much darker. It takes the form of an attempt to rehabilitate Andreas Palaiologos, who died at Rome in poverty in 1502. Born in January 1453 this prince was Manuel II?s eldest grandson and might in other circumstances have hoped to become emperor himself. Instead, he spent a life

of exile taking his begging bowl around the courts of Europe. His life has always been judged an abject failure. Now Harris points out that he was not that different from other members of the house of Palaiologos. Had not his great grandfather John V found himself marooned in Venice for lack of funds? The Venetians were wary of advancing money to the Palaiologan emperors, because they knew there was little chance of ever getting it back. It has been calculated that by 1453 the Byzantine emperor owed the Venetians 585,000 *hyperpyra*, but this has to be set against a total indebtedness of 19,275,000 *hyperpyra*. Andreas?s grandfather Manuel II spent three uncomfortable years in the West looking for support. His uncle John VIII equally made a tour of the Italian and Hungarian courts. Incidentally, the only way that John VIII was able to kit himself out in fitting fashion to attend the Church Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1438 was by purloining alms sent from Russia for the upkeep of the monastery of the Pantokrator. Harris?s attempt to retrieve Andreas Palaiologos?s reputation only leaves the impression that Byzantium was in more of a mess in its closing years than even Ivan Djuri? allowed in his notably pessimistic depiction of the Byzantine Empire in the reign of John VIII Palaiologos. There was, in other words, little hope for Byzantium; only a grim struggle for survival, which it was bound to lose.

In the recent historiography of late Byzantium Djuri? is a dissenting voice. His contention is that Manuel II failed to make the most of the opportunities opened up by the Ottoman defeat in 1402 and bequeathed an almost impossible position to his son John VIII, who with great ingenuity ensured Byzantium?s survival in the face of rampant Ottoman expansion. Harris has Djuri??s book in his bibliography, but never once refers to it in his notes. It would have helped if Harris had addressed Djuri??s views directly, if only because they turn on a fundamental problem of late Byzantine history: how reliable a guide is George Sphrantzes? Of the late Byzantine histories his *Chronikon* is the most original and attractive, if not in terms of traditional Byzantine historiography the most accomplished. Its framework is that of the popular *Short Chronicle*, but its contents are more those of a commonplace book or journal, not unlike the *ricordanze* so frequently kept by Florentines. This provides an immediacy and apparent authenticity, which is not matched by other Byzantine histories. Sphrantzes was especially good at recording or possibly embroidering conversations. When Constantine XI wanted to send him on yet another diplomatic mission in search of a wife, the historian remonstrated that this must positively be the last. Otherwise, his wife would have every reason to divorce him, because he had been away from home so much on imperial service. This is an anecdote, which has the ring of truth about it. Sphrantzes becomes a man, whom the modern reader thinks he can know and trust. His judgements underpin virtually all political histories of late Byzantium. He had a high opinion of Manuel II and Constantine XI, both of whom he served personally, and a correspondingly low opinion of John VIII, with whom he had little to do. Harris is happy to follow Sphrantzes without subjecting his views to critical assessment. If he had, he would have produced a rather different book, which dealt in uncertainties rather than certainties. He is more concerned to set out what we can reasonably know about Byzantium?s final years. This often means passing over apparently important events without comment, as for example the extraordinary flight in 1450 of the Orthodox Patriarch Gregory Melissenos to the safety of Rome. In this particular case, any explanation soon turns into speculation. This is equally true of Constantine XI?s failure to go through with a coronation. This may be the most baffling mystery of Constantine XI?s reign, but Harris does not even mention it, almost certainly because it commands no agreed explanation. But Constantine?s lack of a coronation was noted at the time and clearly an important issue. It needs to be discussed, if only because it reveals the conflicting forces, with which Constantine XI had to contend on the eve of the final siege.

Kioussopoulou, by contrast, is willing to delve beneath the surface of Byzantine political life. She uses sources, which Harris has been careful to avoid. The most important of these are the satire of *Mazaris* and the comedy of *Katablattas*. Harris makes limited use of the former and completely ignores the latter despite its being possibly the most significant, certainly the most interesting, newly discovered text from the last years of Byzantium. These texts provide a humorous insight into the bitter infighting, which characterised Byzantine court life. They call to mind similar Komnenian texts: the *Timarion* in the case of *Mazaris* and Nikephoros Basilakes?s *Adversus Bagoam* in that of *Katablattas*. A comparison of these texts suggests that the politics of the late Palaiologan court were little different from those of the early Komnenian court. Advancement depended on imperial or aristocratic patronage, to which end denigration of rivals was a

valuable weapon. *Mazaris* and *Katablattas* do not in the end provide solid support for Kioussopoulou?s contention that the Byzantine emperor was becoming more of a ?constitutional? monarch, as he sought to adapt his authority to the realities of the time.

Much turns on the role of the senatorial and political *archontes*. Kioussopoulou regards them as constituting semi-official bodies, which represented aristocratic and popular interests respectively before the emperor. We know quite a lot about the senatorial *archontes*. They were court dignitaries, whose position was protected by convention. George Sphrantzes has recorded a long conversation he had with Constantine XI about his possible promotion to Grand Logothete. The emperor was not able to satisfy his trusted servant?s request, because such a promotion would upset the legitimate expectations of other senatorial *archontes*, which reveals that even over appointments the emperor did not have a free hand. Constantine XI also confided to Sphrantzes that on most policy matters there was very little that he could do because of opposition from his chief minister the Grand Duke Loukas Notaras. This may not have been an entirely constitutional matter, more a reflection of the emperor?s financial obligation to his chief minister, who stood surety to the Venetians for a loan they made to the emperor. However, these episodes provide some support for Kioussopoulou?s view that by the end of Byzantium the emperor?s authority was hedged around by aristocratic privilege. But there is no reason to suppose that it was given any institutional basis. It was a matter of convention. The ceremonial and the hierarchy of the imperial court seem still to have provided the framework, within which politics worked.

While the senatorial *archontes* are easily identifiable, the political *archontes* are a much more shadowy group. They undoubtedly existed, but what exactly they did is hard to determine. They may or may not have been identical with the demarchs, who appear in the sources with responsibilities for the different quarters of Constantinople. At best, the political *archontes* were the self-appointed intermediaries between sections of the populace and the palace. Their very obscurity suggests that there was little progress towards anything like a popular assembly at Constantinople. There was an almost complete absence of any popular infrastructure in late Byzantium. Gone were the guilds, which in the 11th century had had a political role to play. Kioussopoulou asks a great many questions, which are pertinent and well framed, but they are based on an expectation that Byzantium will follow patterns of change observable in other medieval societies. The trouble with Byzantium is that change never followed any clear direction. It was more a matter of adapting to circumstances. It was a way of protecting the fiction of an ideal order (*taxis*), which in the end was more or less all that was left. As the Castilian traveller Pero Tafur observed, when he visited Constantinople in 1437, ?the emperor?s state is as splendid as ever, but, properly regarded, he is like a bishop without a see?. In their different ways Harris and Kioussopoulou provide excellent commentary on this judgement. Harris has more on the emperor?s splendid state and only hints at the abject poverty it concealed. For Kioussopoulou the bankruptcy of an old order opens up possibilities for the creation of something new, which was of course still-born.

Notes

1. Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople, 1453* (Cambridge, 1965).Back to (1)
2. John W. Barker, *Manuel II Palaeologus (1391?1425): a Study in Late Byzantine Statesmanship* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1969).Back to (2)
3. Donald M. Nicol, *The Immortal Emperor: the Life and Legend of Constantine Palaiologos, the Last Emperor of the Romans* (Cambridge, 1992).Back to (3)
4. Ivan Djuri?, *Le crépuscule de Byzance* (Paris, 1996).Back to (4)
5. M.-H. Blanchet, *Georges-Gennadios Scholarios (vers 1400?vers 1472): un intellectuel orthodoxe face à la disparition de l?Empire byzantin* (Paris, 2008); C. M. Woodhouse, *Gemistos Plethon: the Last of the Hellenes* (Oxford, 1986).Back to (5)
6. Nicolas Oikonomides, *Hommes d?affaires grecs et latins à Constantinople (XIIIe-XVe siècles)* (Montreal and Paris, 1979).Back to (6)

Other reviews:
Yale University Press

http://yalepress.yale.edu/reviews.asp [3]

Source URL: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1030

Links:
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5268
[2] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5267
[3] http://yalepress.yale.edu/reviews.asp?isbn=9780300117868