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The Greatest Misfortune in the *Oikoumene* Byzantine Historiography on the Fall of Constantinople in 1453**

Abstract: The focus of the paper is on the manner in which the so-called *Four Historians of the Fall* of the Byzantine Empire to the Ottoman Turks – Doukas, Laonikos Chalkokondyles, George Sphrantzes and Kritoboulos of Imbros – describe the 1453 conquest of Constantinople, revealing at the same time their different political views both on this event and on the historical reality before and after it.

Keywords: Doukas, Laonikos Chalkokondyles, George Sphrantzes, Kritoboulos of Imbros, political attitude, Constantinople

The fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453 was an event which more than any other left a deep imprint not only in the collective memory of the Greeks but also on the other nations that considered themselves as spiritual children of the Byzantine Empire. Western European states, on the other hand, soon pragmatically accepted the change of master in the city on the Bosphorus and did not mourn the lost Queen of Cities as the Greeks have ever since.

What this experience meant to the Byzantines is a question which involves uncertainties over the terms they used to express their identity, and their meaning – Hellene (Ἑλλην), Roman (Ῥωμαίος), race (ράτσα, φυλή), genus (γένος), nation (ἔθνος), fatherland (πατρίς). As pointed out by S. Vryonis, the usage of these terms varied not only from writer to writer but also in the work of a single writer.¹

The main Greek historical sources for the events are the works of the so-called “historians of the fall” of the Byzantine Empire to the Ottomans – Doukas, Laonikos Chalkokondyles, George Sphrantzes and Kritoboulos of Imbros. Although they wrote after 1453, both as contemporaries and as witnesses, it is their cultural and political background as well as the context of their work

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¹ S. Vryonis, “Byzantine Cultural Self-Consciousness in the Fifteenth Century”, in *The Twilight of Byzantium: Aspects of Cultural and Religious History in the Later Byzantine Empire*, eds. D. Mouriki & S. Ćurčić (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1991), 5–14.

taken as a whole – narratives of the decline of the Byzantine Empire and the rise of the Ottoman one – that link them closely to the historical phenomenon today known as Byzantium. Their narratives, on the other hand, offer very different interpretations of these events, as may best be seen from their accounts of the fall of Constantinople which, in their eyes, was a turning point in world history.

Laonikos Chalkokondyles' *Demonstrations of Histories* written in Constantinople around 1464-68 cover the longest period (1298-1463). The work appears to have been addressed to the local Greek population and, in a broader sense, to Western European intellectuals.²

Doukas' narrative, which survives without a title and in only one manuscript, covers a shorter period (1341-1462). It apparently was addressed to the Byzantine nobles who supported the church union, and to the Hellenized circles of the Western archons who ruled some parts of Byzantium, such as Gattilusio of Lesbos in whose service Doukas had been since 1421.³

George Sphrantzes, a dignitary, diplomat and close associate and friend of the last three Palaiologan emperors, wrote a chronicle known as *Chronicon Minus* which relates the events from 1413 to 1477. As an Orthodox Roman and bitter opponent of the Ottoman Turks, he shared both the political views and the fate of the Byzantine archons who fled to the West after the Ottoman conquest of the Morea in 1460. His work is believed to have been addressed to them.⁴

Finally, Kritoboulos of Imbros, a Byzantine intellectual who was a member of the learned circle of Gennadios Scholarios, wrote a programmatic history recounting the events that took place between 1451 and 1467. Although it is commonly held that Kritoboulos, who dedicated this work to Mehmed II the Conqueror, wrote it as a laudatory tribute to the sultan's person and deeds, he in fact is quite critical of his hero and the Ottoman Turks in general, as evidenced mostly by his description of the conquest of Constantinople.

And it was Kritoboulos who wrote the most detailed account of the events prior, during and after the fall of Constantinople. Although dedicated to Mehmed Fatih, whom he regarded as the Byzantine emperors' legitimate suc-

² H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, vol. I (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1978), 485-490; D. R. Reinsch, "Η θεώρηση της πολιτικής και πολιτιστικής φυσιογνωμίας των Ελλήνων στους ιστορικούς της Άλωσης", *Études balkaniques* 6 (*Cahiers Pierre Belon*) (1999), 80; A. Kaldellis, "The Date of Laonikos Chalkokondyles' Histories", *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 52 (2012), 119, 133-134; *Laonikos Chalkokondyles, The Histories*, trans. A. Kaldellis, *Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library* 33-34 (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2014), vol. 1, x-xi.

³ Hunger, *Literatur*, 490-494; Reinsch, "Θεώρηση", 82, 84.

⁴ Hunger, *Literatur*, 494-499; *Giorgio Sfranze, Cronaca*, ed. R. Maisano, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* 29 (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1990), 69^a; Reinsch, "Θεώρηση", 84-86.

cessor, his work, as noted by D. R. Reinsch, was addressed to the Greeks of Constantinople.⁵ Yet, it was written in order to become part of the Greek historical canon. In the dedicatory letter at the beginning of his history, Kritoboulos states that not only is there no history in Greek of the sultan whose deeds, no inferior to those of Alexander, should be passed on to future generations for eternal glory, but that those who will live after Kritoboulos should not be deprived of such a narrative and its lessons (τοιούτης ἀμοιρήσαντες ἱστορίας τε καὶ μαθήσεως). Although, the historian continues, many competent Arabs or Persians could perform the task better, as they are familiar with the sultan's deeds, having witnessed them unlike him, their effort would be of little consequence unless written in Greek, the language respected far and wide. For once philhellenes translate his history into their own languages the deeds of the sultan will become known not only to the Greeks but also to western nations as far as the British Isles, and even beyond.⁶ The sultan's deeds described in Greek were intended to become part of Greek tradition and history, part of Greek identity. Kritoboulos' work was, therefore, written explicitly for future generations. The historian observes that it is in the nature of human memory to belittle ancient deeds because they become less and less believable as times goes by, while those more recent are easy to embrace simply because they are closer, be they worthy of admiration or not.⁷ For future generations to admire something from the past and learn from it, the Greeks should present the sultan's feats to them.

Kritoboulos begins by asking future generations for forgiveness because, unlike many others, he does not merely lament over the misfortune but also exposes the weaknesses of his own people. Yet, he essentially does not criticize his compatriots and minimizes their responsibility. For if, he says, there were individuals who, although in charge, did not use their power as they should have, it was not the fault of the people (οὐκ ἔστι τοῦτο τοῦ γένους ἀμάρτημα), but their own.⁸ On the other hand, the example of Loukas Notaras is quite indicative. It is well known that Notaras, "one of the most capable and the most illustrious in knowledge, wealth, virtue and political power",⁹ was not only willing but actively sought to come to terms with the Ottoman Turks in order to keep his power, influence and wealth.¹⁰ The sultan even thought of appointing Notaras as com-

⁵ Reinsch, "Θεώρησι", 81; cf. Hunger, *Literatur*, 500-501.

⁶ *Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae*, ed. D. R. Reinsch, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* 22 (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1983), 4-5.

⁷ *Ibid.* 12.

⁸ *Ibid.* 13-15.

⁹ *Ibid.* 82.

¹⁰ E. Zachariadou, "Τὰ λόγια καὶ ὁ θάνατος τοῦ Λούκα Νοταρά", in *Ροδῶνια, Τιμὴ στον Μ. Ι. Μανούσκα*, I (Rethymno 1994), 135-146; D. R. Reinsch, "Lieber den Turban als was? Bemerkungen zum Dictum Lukas Notaras", in *ΦΙΛΑΕΛΛΗΝ, Studies in Honour of Robert Brown-*

mander of the city and charging him with the task of repopulating it. But when some people led the sultan into believing that Notaras would plot against him, he was struck by the arrows of envy, and he and his sons met an unjust death. The *megas doux* died bravely.¹¹ In other words, Notaras' death was not a consequence of his own political choice.

Kritoboulos' history, then, is essentially about the *translatio imperii*, but it had two aims – to instruct the Greeks first and then, once translated into other languages by philhellene scholars, the rest of the *oikoumene*. His work reveals the political views which he shared with those of like mind and which he hoped would be accepted by their compatriots as well. That political stance implied cooperation with the new masters and the acceptance of the new circumstances.

Kritoboulos' endeavour to praise the person and deeds of Mehmed the Conqueror put aside, his account of the siege of Constantinople is a very sharp criticism of his hero and the Turks in general. Two contrasting statements in Mehmed's speech to his soldiers seem to suggest what Kritoboulos believed Constantinople represented for the Ottomans and what the city meant to the Byzantines. Namely, the sultan's statement that the mighty Ottomans are defied by a city which now is nothing more than farmland, worthless houses and empty walls, most of them in ruins, seems to suggest what Constantinople represented for the Turks.¹² For Kritoboulos, on the other hand, Constantinople was something else. He shows it through Mehmed's enticement to his soldiers to battle, promising them that all manner of treasures awaits them there, in the imperial palaces, in the houses of the powerful, even in the homes of common people, but particularly in the churches. Moreover, they will find many noblemen (*τῶν εὖ γεγονότων*), some of whom they will sell, and some of whom they will keep as slaves. They will also find beautiful women, whom they can make their wives, their servants or they can sell them, as well as young noble boys. They will delight in the beauty of public buildings, houses and gardens. The sultan will give them a large and populous city, the capital of the ancient Romans – which has attained the peak of its good fortune and glory, and has truly been the head of the whole *oikoumene* – for loot and plunder.¹³

Kritoboulos openly criticizes the wanton violence of the janissaries and other Ottoman soldiers upon their entry into the city. His emotional description of the abuse of women, old men, and children, and of thousands of other horrible acts (*ἄλλα μυρία εἰργασμένους δεινά*)¹⁴ certainly does not fit with what is

ing, ed. C. Constantinides et al. (Venice: Istituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini, 1996), 377–389.

¹¹ *Critobulos*, 83–85.

¹² *Critobulos*, 29.

¹³ *Ibid.* 60–61.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 71–72.

widely accepted to have been the purpose of his history – to glorify Mehmed the Conqueror. Kritoboulos wonders if there is a way at all to describe the desecration and burning down of churches (τῶν ἱερῶν), the opening of tombs and the throwing of the remains of the dead into the streets. Many books, sacred as well as profane, were burnt or destroyed in some other way or sold for nothing. The city was so ravaged that it was hard to believe that there had ever been houses with furniture.¹⁵ In other words, the description of the devastation Constantinople underwent is a portrayal of barbarism and savageness. When the sultan entered the city and looked about to see its size and position – to which Kritoboulos adds its magnificence, the beauty of its people, the gracefulness, opulence and splendour of its churches and public buildings and the houses of the powerful (τῶν ἐν δυνάμει) – and saw all the devastation wrought to it, he could not suppress tears at the realisation what a city he had given over to plunder and destruction.

At the beginning of his work, Kritoboulos says that the destruction of the Romans, the oldest and largest state, was the most significant of all events and not a simple change of affairs (μεγίστη δὴ πάντων γέγονεν αὐτὴ καὶ μεταβολὴ πραγμάτων οὐ τῶν τυχόντων).¹⁶ The fall of Constantinople was a tragedy (πάθος) the like of which had never before befallen any of the greatest cities be it in terms of their size or of the bitterness and harshness of destruction.¹⁷ Not even Troy, Babylon or Carthage, Rome, Jerusalem or even Constantinople itself when captured by the Latins, had suffered that much at the hands of their conquerors, for they had not been ravaged as heavily and their inhabitants had not suffered as Constantinople has now. For Kritoboulos, Constantinople was splendid, glorious and rich, the example of every good, the centre of knowledge, wisdom, culture and virtue, of all the best in one place, the New Jerusalem, the fatherland. This time, however, it was deprived of everything: wealth, glory, order, splendour, honour, the brilliance of its population, valour, education, wisdom, religious order, dominion. And just as the city had once thrived in prosperity and good fortune, so now it was brought down into the abyss of misfortune and misery. The city which once had ruled over many nations now became the object of shameful slavery.¹⁸

Similarly to some short anonymous chronicles,¹⁹ Kritoboulos stresses the parallelism between the names of the first and the last emperor and their mothers, giving a sort of a periodization of Byzantine history. The first was Constan-

¹⁵ Ibid. 72–73, 74, 75.

¹⁶ Ibid. 12.

¹⁷ Ibid. 76.

¹⁸ Ibid. 78–79.

¹⁹ *Die byzantinischen Kleinchroniken*, vol. I, ed. P. Schreiner, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* 12 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1975), 370.

tine, the fortunate emperor (εὐτυχής), son of Helen, who gave prosperity to the city, and the last was Constantine, the unfortunate emperor (δυστυχοῦς), son of Helen, in whose reign the city was reduced to the worst slavery and misery. He was the paragon of virtue, a new Pericles, but he was unfortunate throughout his life and especially at its end.²⁰ In the end, the fall of the city was God's will.²¹

The Greeks should, therefore, remember the suffering which the city had gone through. If Kritoboulos' history was meant to be read by the sultan, it is no wonder that it did not have a bright future at his court. For it contained serious criticisms, at least as far as the description of the fall is concerned, and the sultan expectedly did not like it. At the end of the dedicatory letter Kritoboulos says that, if his words seem far too inadequate to describe the sultan's deeds and so fail to match up to their greatness, which must be the case, then the book should be condemned as useless, while he himself, reverencing him from afar in silent awe, will leave the recording of history to others who are much more competent in such matters.²² This was exactly the fate both of the writer and, until the nineteenth century, of his work.

Laonikos Chalkokondyles wrote a shorter account of the fall of Constantinople. His data matches that of Kritoboulos and Doukas. For him, the fall of Constantinople generally meant enslavement. The words of Ismail, son of the ruler of Sinope, who at the moment the city wall was broken through called on the Byzantines to send an envoy to the sultan in order to obtain good peace terms, seem to reveal the author's own views – the city would otherwise be seized by force, women and children enslaved, and the Byzantines themselves annihilated.²³ Moreover, for him, the city was the empire itself, as suggested by the words of Mehmed II demanding that the janissaries help him win an empire (ἐμοὶ εὐκλειῆ ἀνελόμενοι συγκατεργάζεσθε τὴν βασιλείαν ἐμοί).²⁴ Chalkokondyles sees the attacking Turks as barbarians, as does the Emperor of the Hellenes, who died bravely.²⁵ Chalkokondyles, same as Doukas, mentions the prophecy that the conquerors will break into the city, but only as far as the place called Forum Tauros (ἄχρι τοῦ Ταύρου χώρου), and then the defenders will drive them away. In his description of the barbarity of Ottoman soldiers Chalkokondyles is, however, more restrained. He speaks of scores of people seeking shelter in the

²⁰ *Critobulos*, 80–81.

²¹ *Ibid.* 80.

²² *Ibid.* 9.

²³ *Laonici Chalcocondylae Historiarum Demonstrationes*, vol. II, ed. E. Darkó (Budapest: sumptibus Academiae litterarum hungaricae, 1922), 156.

²⁴ *Chalc.* II, 157.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 159.

city's largest church, Hagia Sophia,²⁶ and he says that many were killed inside the church. Others, wandering the streets in confusion, were soon captured or slain. On the other hand, many, such as Theophilos Palaiologos and Palaiologos Metochites, fought bravely for the fatherland (πρὸ τῆς πατρίδος), hopeful of being able to prevent their wives and children from being forced into slavery (εἰς ἀνδραποδισμόν).²⁷

The barbarity of the Turks is shown by other pieces of information as well – the janissaries grabbed so much loot that they did not know what to do with it, and it even happened that, unaware of the actual value of the jewellery, they exchanged gold for bronze.²⁸

Chalkokondyles concludes the story of the fall with the observation that it certainly was the most grievous catastrophe known to history (ἡ ξυμφορὰ αὕτη μεγίστη τῶν κατὰ τὴν οἰκουμένην γενομένων ὑπερβαλέσθαι τῷ πάθει) and that the complete destruction of the Hellenes is comparable to the fall of Troy. The Romans (τοὺς Ῥωμαίους),²⁹ he continues, believe that this disaster befell the Hellenes (τοῖς Ἕλλησι) as a vengeance for the sack of Troy long ago.³⁰ Both writers, Kritoboulos and Chalkokondyles, are believed to have belonged to the same intellectual circle, the one gathered around Gennadios Scholarios. Both of them saw the fall of Constantinople as revenge for the fall of Troy.³¹

There are views that the interpretation of the fall of Constantinople as vengeance for the sack of Troy had originated among the humanists in the West. Such an interpretation of the fall of Constantinople, which even implied that it had been justified, became so popular that, as some believe, Chalkokondyles accepted it, since he probably completed his work while in Italy, where he had contacts with humanistic circles.³²

Laonikos Chalkokondyles, viewed by some as the originator of τῆς μεγάλης ιδέας,³³ and by others as the only historian of the fall demonstrably influenced by the Renaissance,³⁴ is a writer whose historical work continues to intrigue scholars. It has recently been argued that he was the Herodotus of the

²⁶ Ibid. 161.

²⁷ Ibid. 161–162.

²⁸ Ibid. 162.

²⁹ Here Chalkokondyles (*Histories*, xviii) has the Latins in mind.

³⁰ *Chalc.*, 166–167.

³¹ Reinsch, “Θεώρηση”, 81.

³² M. Philippides & W. K. Hanak, *The Siege and the Fall of Constantinople in 1453: Historiography, Topography, and Military Studies* (Farnham; Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 201–202.

³³ *Chalc.* II, I, 2; Hunger, *Literatur*, 489.

³⁴ J. Harris, “Laonikos Chalkokondyles and the Rise of the Ottoman Turks”, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 27 (2003), 153–170.

fifteenth century and that his work should be seen as post-Byzantine rather than proto-humanistic.³⁵ While H. Hunger regarded him as religiously indifferent,³⁶ D. R. Reinsch correctly insists that he not only was interested in religious matters but also, unlike his teacher Plethon, a Christian.³⁷ He was not, though, a solitary humanist who wrote his work in Athens, Italy or Crete. He wrote it, as others believe, in Constantinople,³⁸ addressing it to the local Greeks and, more widely, the intellectuals who knew Greek and who met with his work around 1500.³⁹ It seems, however, that there are elements in his narrative, most notably his use of names and toponyms, which suggest that he intended it for a broader audience. He does not, for instance, use the name Golden Horn, but refers to the place simply as the harbour. Or, why would he feel the need to explain what Hagia Sophia was, the most famous church in the world even after Constantinople was captured by the Turks who even today use that name? His use of ancient toponyms may be indicative not only of his classical education and preferences but also of his wish to make his work accessible to his potential audience, the audience of Western Europe or, at least, to a world beyond Constantinople.

Doukas, unlike the previous two writers, makes his political position, which is basically pro-unionist and anti-Turkish, perfectly clear. His narrative of the fall is, like that of Kritoboulos, detailed, dramatically told, and offers a glimpse of the everyday life of the Constantinopolitans prior to the conquest. But Doukas provides some information which Kritoboulos does not. He tells us about a Byzantine embassy sent to Mehmed while he was in Asia Minor dealing with the situation in Karaman. The embassy was received by Halil Pasha who heard their complaint that they had not yet received the money for Orhan promised by the sultan upon his accession to the throne. The pasha then gave the famous speech which appears to reflect the attitude of the writer himself – You stupid and unreasonable Greeks, you must change your ways (Ἄφετε, ἃ κατέχετε).⁴⁰ This was the reason for Mehmed to suspend his campaign in Karaman and return to Europe to begin preparations for the assault on Constantinople. That was, according to Doukas, a poor decision taken by a foolish assem-

³⁵ Chalkokondyles, *Histories*, x-xi. See also A. Kaldellis, *A New Herodotos: Laonikos Chalkokondyles on the Ottoman Empire, the Fall of Byzantium, and the Emergence of the West. Supplements to the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library* (Washington D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2015).

³⁶ Hunger, *Literatur*, 489.

³⁷ *Chalc.* I, 133; II, 223; Reinsch, “Θεώρησις”, 78.

³⁸ Kaldellis, “Date”, 119, 133–134.

³⁹ Reinsch, “Θεώρησις”, 80.

⁴⁰ *Ducas, Historia Turco-Byzantina (1341–1462)*, ed. V. Grecu (Bucharest: București Ed. Acad. Republicae Popularis Romanicae, 1958), 293.

bly of Romans which had conceived a futile plan (ἡ μωρὰ τῶν Ῥωμαίων συναγωγὴ ἐσκέψατο τινα ματαίαν βουλήν).⁴¹

A motif threaded throughout Doukas' narrative is that of a treacherous and duplicitous sultan.⁴² Yet, in parallel with his criticism of the deceitful sultan – a wolf by nature disguised in a lambskin, an Antichrist before Antichrist, the destroyer of Christ the Shepherd, the enemy of the Cross and a true apprentice of Satan, Nebuchadnezzar who arrived before the gates of Jerusalem – Doukas levels severe criticism at his compatriots.

His sharpest criticism, of course, is made about the rejection of the decree of church union of 1439. The emperor, according to Doukas, only pretended to support it, as did all members of the clergy and the senate who attended the ceremony of its reaffirmation in Hagia Sophia in December 1452.⁴³ He designates the anti-unionists as schismatics (τὸ σχισματικὸν μέρος).⁴⁴ Ironically distorting their piety, Doukas says that the unruly mob and common people (χυδαῖος οὖν καὶ ἀγοραῖος λαὸς) that left the enclosure of the Pantokrator monastery went to taverns where they cursed the unionists and raised toasts to the Mother of God, invoking her help.⁴⁵ He calls the Constantinopolitans an uncouth mob opposed to everything of a better sort, rooted in arrogance, with branches of vain opinion, flowers of haughty pride, the dregs of the Hellenes, quick to despise the rest of mankind although so despicable themselves. Since the Byzantines broke so many oaths they had taken in the name of the Holy Trinity, in Lyon, in Florence, even in Hagia Sophia, nothing less could be expected than that all memory of them and their city will be wiped off the face of the earth.⁴⁶ Doukas finds Cardinal Isidore to be a wise man, educated in the true dogmas (πεπαιδευμένον ἐν δόγμασιν ὀρθοῖς), a Roman by birth who proved himself to be an honourable father at the Council of Florence.⁴⁷ Very indicative in this sense is Doukas' claim that Gennadios Scholarios continued to attack St. Thomas Aquinas and Demetrios Kydones as heretics, in which he had great support from Loukas Notaras, *mezas doux*, who preferred the Turkish turban to the Latin *καλύπτρα*.⁴⁸

⁴¹ *Ducas*, 293.

⁴² *Ibid.* 289, 293, 303.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 315.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 317.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 319.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 315.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 329. Reinsch, "Lieber den Turban", 377–389, suggests that the term "καλύπτρα λατινική" does not refer to the papal mitre or tiara, but rather to the Latin imperial crown. See also N. Necipoğlu, *Byzantium between the Ottomans and the Latins. Politics and Society in the Later Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 214–218.

So, if we bear in mind that the “mob” Doukas describes was in fact the majority of Constantinopolitans, and that he thought that even those who accepted the union only pretended to do so, it follows that Constantinople, as a symbol of everything that had fallen with it, was treacherous and politically immature. The impression is that Doukas distances himself from Constantinople. It is obvious that he was a supporter of the union, but his zeal for it suggests that he might even have converted to Catholicism, as, after all, did many intellectuals and archons of his time. One should not forget that he had spent years in the service of the Genoese.

Doukas directly addresses the people who took shelter in Hagia Sophia after the Ottomans entered the city: “You miserable Romans (*Ῥωμαῖοι*), you wretches, who even yesterday and the day before called this church a cavern of the infidel, an altar of the heathen! Not a single one of you would enter it then due to its defilement because the services were celebrated by those who had embraced the union. But now that wrath looms over you, you have fled into it as if it were your only hope and salvation. And yet, even though just anger has come upon you, your hearts are not inclined towards peace.”⁴⁹

Doukas’ account tallies with that of Kritoboulos in the gist and sequence of the main events during the siege of Constantinople. Both report on the emperor’s embassy to the sultan prompted by the beginning of the construction of the fort of Rumeli Hisar, on the arrival of Urban, on a large cannon being transported from Edirne, the conquest of Byzantine territories along the Sea of Marmara and the siege of Selymbria, the naval battle won by the Byzantines, on Giustiniani, on the transport of Turkish ships into the Golden Horn. Doukas even uses the same parallel as Kritoboulos, likening this undertaking to that of Xerxes. The only difference being that Kritoboulos mentions the canal which Xerxes cut through the Athos peninsula, whereas Doukas states that Xerxes crossed the Hellespont, but was defeated by the Athenians and retreated. This new Macedonian, however, crossed the land as though it had been a sea, destroyed the Hellenes and golden Athenians, the jewel of the world, and took the Queen of Cities.⁵⁰ In other words, this Athens, i.e. Constantinople, was conquered by a new Alexander who surpassed even Xerxes himself. Thus, this Conqueror is at once a new Alexander, by what he achieved, and better than him, by the skill with which he achieved it. The likening to Alexander the Great, by the way, was not an invention of the Byzantine historians; that was how the sultan perceived himself.⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Ducas*, 365.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 339.

⁵¹ D. R. Reinsch, “Kritobulos of Imbros – learned historian, Ottoman *raya* and Byzantine patriot”, *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 40 (2003), 305–306.

Doukas describes how John Hunyadi sent an envoy to the sultan with helpful instructions how to destroy the city walls. Giving an utterly down-to-earth explanation of why a Christian would have done such a thing, Doukas refers to one of the prophecies in which his story of the fall abounds - Hunyadi was told by a prophet that fortune would not smile on the Christians until Constantinople was destroyed by the Turks.⁵² Treacherous Constantinopolitans, Christians, should, therefore, pay for their oath-breaking, so that fortune might return to righteous Christians. Doukas is, therefore, a Christian first and then a Hellene, but he does not identify himself with the Constantinopolitans. Consequently, Hunyadi's act was not only explicable but justified as well.

Whereas, for Kritoboulos, the people (γένος) were by no means responsible for the misfortune which had befallen the Romans, Doukas takes a diametrically opposite view. In his poignant description of men and women, monks and nuns weeping bitterly, pounding their chests in despair and begging to be admitted to the ships that were leaving the city, Doukas argues that it was not possible because it had already been decided that they should drink from the cup filled with God's wrath.⁵³

Doukas, of course, does not fail to describe the plundering of the city, especially of its monasteries and churches, Hagia Sophia in particular, and of the houses of distinguished noblemen, but his description of the barbarities is not nearly comparable in manner and extensiveness to the one of Kritoboulos.⁵⁴

In his lamentation for Constantinople, with which his narrative of the fall ends, Doukas calls it the head of all cities, the centre of the four quarters of the world, the Glory of the Christian Faith and the destruction of the barbarians, a second Paradise planted in the West, the daughter of Zion. He grieves over the holy relics of saints, the churches, the bodies of the emperors, the books. Jeremiah, who mourned over Jerusalem, mourns over Constantinople as well, and to him, Doukas believes, God has revealed the truth about the New Jerusalem. The captivity which befell Constantinopolitans is not of the Babylonian kind; they are scattered all over the world.⁵⁵

Finally, George Sphrantzes had no particular audience in mind when writing the notes that would serve as the basis of his *Memoirs*. This work was most likely addressed to the few Byzantine officials who, like Sphrantzes himself, were on their way to Western Europe.⁵⁶ Although he does not say so explicitly, he identifies himself with the Orthodox Romans who acknowledge the

⁵² *Ducas*, 343.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 371, 373.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 363, 365, 367, 371, 375, 391, 393.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 385–391, 393.

⁵⁶ *Sfranze, Cronaca*, 69*.

Palaiologoi as their leaders, as opposed to the impious (ἄσεβεις) and the Christians of the West (τῆς Δύσεως Χριστιανοί).⁵⁷

His report on the siege and fall of the city is written succinctly in the manner of a chronicle. Recent research suggests that he may have recorded a special diary of the fall of the Byzantine capital.⁵⁸ Apart from a short note that the sultan took the city in the early morning of 29 May 1453, that Emperor Constantine was killed then, that he himself was in another part of the city at the time and was captured, Sphrantzes says nothing else about the event itself.⁵⁹ His criticism is aimed at the Christians of other countries who did little to help Constantinople. The first on his list is the Despot of Serbia, Djuradj Branković, who did not refuse to act as an intermediary in the peace agreement between the Hungarians and the Turks, although that would have at least delayed the attack on the city. The miserable despot did not realize that once the head is removed, the limbs perish too.⁶⁰ Not even the Venetians helped, particularly due to Francesco Foscari, who had personal motives. Namely, at the time when Constantine Dragases was Despot of the Peloponnesus, negotiations were conducted about his marriage with Foscari's daughter. There was a considerable dowry involved, as well as the possibility of uniting his dominion with the territories of the Venetians. But after Constantine's accession to the imperial throne, this union became unfeasible, since not a single archon or archontissa of Constantinople would have accepted as their mistress and empress the daughter of a Venetian, not even the daughter of the doge himself.⁶¹ There was no help from the Church of Rome or the Sultan of Cairo either.⁶² Not a penny arrived from Serbia, although both men and money could have been sent secretly. They had been sent to the sultan instead, and now the Turks shouted from beneath the city walls: "Even the Serbs are with us!"⁶³ Nor did other Christians come to the aid of the city – those from Trebizond, Wallachia and Georgia.⁶⁴ The Hungarians waited to see how things would develop. Moreover, Hunyadi demanded territories in return, and Sphrantzes claims that he himself wrote a chrysobull granting him

⁵⁷ Reinsch, "Θεώρησι", 85, 86.

⁵⁸ Philippides & Hanak, *Siege and Fall*, 49, 144.

⁵⁹ Sfranze, *Cronaca*, 134.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 136. On the attitude of the historians of the Fall towards Serbia see M. Nikolić, "The Byzantine Historiography on the State of Serbian Despots", *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 45 (2008), 279-288.

⁶¹ Sfranze, *Cronaca*, 136-138.

⁶² Ibid. 138.

⁶³ Ibid. 140.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Mesembria when the siege was laid.⁶⁵ Who knew, Sphrantzes asks, that Lemnos was ceded to the Catalan king or how much money was sent to Chios in order to secure some help? The emperor did even more in order to save his house, the Christians and his own life.⁶⁶ He fasted, he prayed, both on his own and through priests whom he gave money to do so, he looked after the poor, he took many pledges, all in the hope of preventing the Christians from being enslaved by the Turks. All this was despised by God, for what sins, Sphrantzes does not know. On the other hand, nothing of the emperor's efforts was known to people and so everyone talked of him as they pleased.⁶⁷ In the 1590s, Western Europe would encounter Sphrantzes' work through the version written by Makarios Melissenos.⁶⁸

The fate of the city was inseparable from the fate of its last emperor. It is the personage of Constantine Dragases that is the focus of the accounts of the fall in Byzantine short chronicles. There, Constantinople is the Empress of Cities, Jerusalem destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, the fatherland of all, the New Rome, the megalopolis. It was ruled by Constantine born in the purple who, defending it, found his death and his equal-to-the-apostles' wreath of martyrdom, unwilling to surrender his palace to the lawless. Although he could have avoided the threat, he rather chose to fight, and was slain and perished together with his fatherland.⁶⁹

It has recently been suggested that Doukas, Kritoboulos, and Chalkokondyles as the youngest of them, were historians who at the same time, independently of one another, responded to the same events and set out to commit them to writing. A new dating of Chalkokondyles' *Histories* has been proposed as well – the period between 1464 and 1468. This chronology would allow for the possibility that it was not just that Chalkokondyles used the work of Kritoboulos,⁷⁰ but that it may have also been the other way around. Indicative in this connection, is that Kritoboulos, at the beginning of his work, says that he will not write about Sultan Mehmed's predecessors since many have already done that.⁷¹ Traditionally the fourth historian of the fall, George Sphrantzes, is no longer assigned to this group, since his work is not, strictly speaking, a his-

⁶⁵ Ibid. 140–142.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 140.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 142.

⁶⁸ On the relationship between Sphrantzes' *Memoirs*, i.e. *Chronicon Minus*, and the *Chronicon Maius*, i.e. its version reworked by Macarios Melissenos, with relevant bibliography and the analysis of parts of interdependent sources, see Philippides & Hanak, *Siege and Fall*, 146–187.

⁶⁹ *Kleinchroniken*, I, 271–272, 369, 370, 419, 436, 529, 632, 640, 656, 684.

⁷⁰ *Critobulos*, 84*–85*.

⁷¹ Ibid. 13.

tory. In any case, there is no evidence to suggest that he was aware of or used any of these historians in his writing.⁷²

For all the difference in their attitudes, to these writers Constantinople was the centre of the world, the beginning and the end of history, its very heart, their fatherland, the New Jerusalem. Their main motive for writing their works was to pass on the memory of the greatest misfortune in the *oikoumene* to future generations of Greeks to perpetuate it and to learn from it. *If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.*⁷³

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⁷² Kaldellis, "Date", 133–134.

⁷³ *Psalm* 137, 5 (KJV).

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