



The Decline of Byzantium Seen Through the Eyes of Its Intellectuals

Ihor Sevcenko

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THE DECLINE
OF BYZANTIUM SEEN THROUGH
THE EYES OF ITS INTELLECTUALS

IHOR ŠEVČENKO

The text is that of a public lecture delivered at Dumbarton Oaks on March 25, 1960. The notes provide select source references. With one or two exceptions, secondary literature has been omitted.

TOWARDS the very end of the fourteenth century, the Patriarch of Constantinople had to remind the recalcitrant Prince of Muscovy of a few basic facts concerning international order. The Prince should remember—so the Patriarch explained—that he was only a local ruler while the Patriarch’s secular lord was the Emperor of the Romans, that is, of all Christians. The fact that the Emperor’s dominions were hard-pressed by the pagans was beside the point. The Emperor enjoyed special prerogatives in the world and in the Church universal. It therefore ill-behooved the Prince to have discontinued mentioning the name of the Emperor Manuel II during the Liturgy.¹

One of Manuel II’s sons, Constantine XII, was the last ruler of Byzantium. When he was still only the Despot of the Peloponnesus, his panegyrists compared him to that other Constantine who had founded the capital of the Empire. From this identity of names, the panegyrists drew most favorable inferences as to the future prospects of Constantinople—in whose defense Constantine XII was to fall in 1453.²

In 1444 these future prospects were spelled out in some detail by Constantine’s friend Bessarion. Once the Despot had carried out the reforms advocated by Bessarion for the Peloponnesus—that ancient Sparta—he would be able to reconquer the European part of the Empire; next, he would cross over to Asia at the head of his regenerated “Spartans”; thus this new Agesilaus would restore the whole Empire to its ancient greatness.³ After 1453, when Constantine was no longer able to listen, one of his former panegyrists favorably compared Byzantine scholars with their Latin counterparts. While many Byzantines, he said, professed Latin in the West, no Latin could dream of teaching Greek in the East.⁴

Faced with these utterances, the uninitiated feels bewildered. Did not the Muscovite Prince reflect, while reading the patriarchal lecture, that in a sense both he and the Emperor of the Romans were equals, since both were vassals of the infidels: he of the Tartar Khan, the Byzantine, of the Turkish sultan? Bessarion’s optimism may have been strengthened by the crusading preparations of the 1440’s, but how could he seriously hope for a reconquest of huge terri-

¹ Letter of Patriarch Antony IV to Grand Prince Vasilij I. Greek text in F. Miklosisch-J. Müller, *Acta et diplomata . . .*, II (1862), pp. 188–192; *Russkaja Istoričeskaja Biblioteka*, VI, 1 (2nd ed., 1908), Appendix, cols. 265–276. Partial English translations: A. A. Vasiliev, *Speculum*, VII (1932), pp. 358–359; E. Barker, *Social and Political Thought in Byzantium* (1957), pp. 194–196.

² Johannes Dokeianos, *Laudation of Constantine Palaeologus*, ed. Sp. Lampros, *Παλαιολογία και Πελοποννησιακά*, I (1912–1923), p. 225, lines 4–7. (In subsequent notes this work will be quoted as Lampros, ΠΠ.)

³ Bessarion, *Letter to Constantine Palaeologus*, ed. Lampros, ΠΠ, IV (1930), p. 36, lines 25–30; in the same letter (p. 44, lines 29–30) Bessarion expresses the wish that the Greek nation might rule over the whole of mankind. On the misplaced optimism of the “Pythian” oracle, composed between 1423 and 1436 (?), predicting the four rebuildings of the Isthmus of Corinth, cf. E. W. Bodnar, “The Isthmian Fortification in Oracular Prophecy,” *American Journal of Archaeology*, 64 (1960), pp. 165–171, esp. pp. 167 and 170.

⁴ Michael Apostolis, *Λόγος περί Ἑλλάδος καὶ Εὐρώπης*, ed. B. Laourdas in Ἐπετηρίς Ἐταιρείας Βυζαντινῶν Σπουδῶν, 19 (1949), p. 243. English translation of the passage: D. J. Geanakoplos, *Greek and Byzantine Studies*, I, 2 (1958), p. 161.

ories lost since the end of the eleventh century? And as for the Greek teachers vaunted by Michael Apostolis—for he was the optimistic panegyrist of Constantine—how did he ever account for the fact that he himself coveted, but never obtained, a professorial chair in Italy?⁵

Initiated Byzantinists like ourselves can easily answer these questions. We say that the patriarchal admonition to the Muscovite Prince is an important text illustrating the Byzantine concept of the hierarchy of states, a sublime pyramid encompassing all the peoples of the civilized world. Bessarion's dreams of reconquest are an expression of the *renovatio* idea which was not abandoned, if at all, until the very last years of the Byzantine Empire. To explain the official flattery and the play on the name of Constantine XII, we refer to late antique textbooks of rhetoric which advised fulsomeness and punning on the names of persons eulogized. Finally, Apostolis is no problem at all since, so some of us assert, the feeling of cultural decline was not present in late Byzantium, not even at its last hour.

In our justified admiration for the durability of the Byzantine imperial idea we Byzantinists have talked ourselves into a delicate position. To judge—superficially, to be sure—by some of our writings, Byzantine intellectuals were so many ostriches hiding their heads in the sands of past imperial glories. In this paper I propose to ask the common-sense question: did the writings of intellectuals who lived through the last two centuries of Byzantium express awareness of, first, the Empire's political and, second, their own cultural decline? I shall try to answer this question with a "yes," lest I be compelled to admit that in my work I am principally concerned with the inhabitants of an antiquarian fool's paradise. Fortunately, texts can be adduced which prove that on occasion educated Byzantines kept their heads up and their eyes open.

The two last centuries of Byzantium were not the first to see the Empire faced with mortal dangers and threats of collapse. Byzantines were familiar enough with these dangers from the early times of the Empire. Towards the middle of the fifth century, imperial diplomats cooling their heels at Attila's headquarters, discussed among themselves the Hun's plans of universal conquest and dispassionately predicted that he would enslave the whole Roman world.⁶ Tenth-century historians of imperial and of less elevated station reflected that the Empire had once declined to the verge of total extinction, and saw in a comet the portent of the almost utter destruction of the Roman rule.⁷ In the

⁵ Cf. H. Noiret, *Lettres inédites de Michel Apostolis . . .* (= *Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome*, 54 [1889]), pp. 19, 54, 102, 130, 144. Cf. pp. 148–153, an advertising tract which today would be entitled "My method of teaching Greek." Vainly anticipating a trip to Italy, Apostolis offers his professorial services (p. 152, lines 23–24).

⁶ Priscus, ed. C. De Boor, *Excerpta de legationibus*, I, 1 (1903), pp. 140, line 21–142, line 22. German translation by E. Doblhofer, *Byzantinische Diplomaten und östliche Barbaren* (= *Byzantinische Geschichtsschreiber*, IV [1955]), pp. 49–51.

⁷ Verge of extinction: Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*, § 29, 58 ff. = p. 124; § 29, 85–86 = p. 126, ed. Moravcsik (a barb against Michael II, the founder of a dynasty which was supplanted by Constantine's grandfather Basil I and therefore maligned by Constantine. But the Empire did fare badly in the beginning of the ninth century). — Comet: Leo Diaconus, *Hist.*, X, 6 = p. 169, lines 11–12, Bonn.

eleventh century, Psellus congratulated Isaac I Comnenus for raising up the prostrate Empire and Andronicus Ducas, a general who had yet to gain his victory, for breathing life back into the dead body of the Roman state.⁸ In the latter case Psellus alluded to the disastrous battle of Manzikert. After 1204 Nicetas Choniates referred to the extinguished self-confidence of the Byzantines and praised God who had put them to death but then had resuscitated them.⁹ The sub-literary public read prophecies concerning the fall of Constantinople which was to be followed by an eschatological happy ending.¹⁰ This public scrutinized the details and inscriptions on the city's statuary for indications of calamities to come and examined the *Brontologia*, or Thunderbooks, to find out whether thunder would portend the fall of a city, or perhaps of *the City*.¹¹

The feeling that the present fell short of the good old times is attested well before the thirteenth century. The Greek turncoat whom the diplomat Priscus met at Attila's headquarters explained that he had left the eastern Roman Empire because its leaders were not up to the level of their ancestors.¹² Around 1100, Theophylactus, Archbishop of Ochrid, disputed his contemporaries who thought that the age in which they lived did not measure up to olden times and who therefore considered the virtuous life to be beyond the capabilities of their own generation.¹³ Even in the self-confident twelfth century, orators pretended to be inferior to their colleagues of the past. One of them reproached nature for bringing Manuel I into the world at the wrong time, for, so he argued, only Gorgias and Isocrates would have been up to the task of singing the Emperor's praises.¹⁴

In his letters, however, Psellus looked forward to victories. Even Choniates' speeches following the year 1204 were relatively optimistic. They clamored for the liberation of the City and expressed confidence in Theodore Lascaris, the Emperor who had slain a Turkish sultan in hand to hand combat.¹⁵

The notions of impending doom and of inferiority to the past became much more pronounced in the final stage of the Empire's history. This final stage began in about 1300.

⁸ Letter to Isaac Comnenus, ed. K. Sathas, *Μεσαιωνική βιβλιοθήκη*, V (1876), p. 301. (Subsequently this collection will be quoted as Sathas, *MB*.); Letter to Andronicus Ducas, ed. Sathas, *MB*, V, p. 394.

⁹ Nicetas Choniates, *Λόγος ἐκδοθείς ἐπὶ τῷ ἀναγνωσθῆναι εἰς τὸν Λάσκαριν κύρ Θεόδωρον*, ed. Sathas, *MB*, I (1872), pp. 110, 118.

¹⁰ Basic texts: Ps.-Methodius of Patara and Ps.-Daniel. Ed. V. Istrin, "Otkrovenie Mefodija Patarskago i apokrifčeskija videnija Daniila v vizantijskoj i slavjano-russkoj literaturax," *Čtenija v imperatorskom obščestve istorii i drevnostej rossijskix pri Moskovskom Universitete*, CLXXXII, 3 (1897), pp. 1-250; 251-330; CLXXXIII, 3 (1897), pp. 1-132; CLXXXIV, 2 (1898), pp. 133-210; cf. E. Sackur, *Sybillinische Texte und Forschungen* (1898), chap. 1: *Pseudomethodius* (Latin version).

¹¹ Robert de Clari, *La Conquête . . .*, §§ 91-92 = pp. 88-89, ed. P. Lauer. English translation by E. H. McNeal, *The Conquest of Constantinople . . .* (= Records of Civilization, XXIII [1936]), pp. 110-111; cf. note 117. *Scriptores Originum Constantinopolitanarum*, ed. Preger, II (1907), p. 176, line 10-177, line 2. *Catalogus codicum astrologorum graecorum*, X (1924), p. 141, line 7, ed. Delatte; cf. *ibidem*, p. 141, line 20.

¹² Priscus, ed. C. de Boor, *Excerpta de legationibus*, I, 1 (1903), p. 138, lines 13-15. English translation in J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, I (1923), p. 285.

¹³ Theophylactus of Ochrid, *Βίος καὶ πολιτεία . . . Κλήμεντος ἐπισκόπου Βουλγάρων*, § 2, ed. A. Milev, *Teofilakt, Kliment Oxridski* (1955), pp. 34-35.

¹⁴ Michael of Thessalonica, ed. W. Regel, *Fontes rerum byzantinorum*, fasc. 1-2 (1917), p. 133, lines 12-19.

¹⁵ Cf. Sathas, *MB*, I, pp. 106, 107, 128, 129, 136.

Under the year 1337 the humanist-historian, Nicephorus Gregoras, spoke of a simultaneous incursion by Tartars from beyond the Danube and by Turks from Asia Minor, and described the clash between these predatory hordes: "One enemy killed the other," he said, "as if they were so many dogs which time after time jumped at a corpse."¹⁶ According to Gregoras the corpse for which these dogs were fighting was the dead body of the Empire. Before and after Gregoras other intellectuals sensed that they had entered the twilight of their history. Such an influential statesman of the early fourteenth century as Theodore Metochites realized that he had been entrusted with the conduct of affairs at a time of catastrophe and knew that he administered the wreckage of the Roman Empire.¹⁷ Cantacuzenus had great nostalgia for the Romans of old and admitted that the "ancestral glory" had been shattered by his time.¹⁸ In the thirteen-forties a half-educated Byzantine named Alexius Makrembolites produced one of the most interesting documents of social protest in late Byzantium. He called it "A Dialogue Between the Rich and the Poor." At one point in the Dialogue the Poor recalled the rich men of yore who built hostels and alms-houses and saw to the instruction of poor maidens. Why couldn't the rich of their day do the same? This was the reply of the Rich:

"But you are leaving out of consideration . . . the flourishing state of affairs which prevailed at that time. Our Empire and its religion were at their height and we had in our possession the farthest reaches of the earth. Now no . . . province is left to us. You also forget that now it is we who are enslaved by all those peoples who were then under our sway. . . . Furthermore, at that time there was no one who was poor or a prisoner of war, whereas now almost all are helots and 'thrice imprisoned.'"¹⁹

If we are to believe the pro-Latin thinker and statesman Demetrius Cydones, even in the second half of the fourteenth century there were people who maintained that Constantinople, being the New Rome, was at the height of its development.²⁰ Cydones, however, puts this argument into the mouths of his adversaries. And before we begin to doubt the sanity of those adversaries, we must realize that Cydones had merely set up straw men and prepared the stage for his own merciless description of reality as it was in the early thirties-sixties. The city of Constantinople was in a state of decline. It was the Turk who ruled and collected revenue. The Byzantines were few, their lower classes were exploited, Islam was making inroads into the Christian ranks. What is so good

¹⁶ Nic. Greg., *Hist.*, I, 535, lines 11-18, Bonn.

¹⁷ Theodore Metochites, *Miscellanea philosophica et historica*, § 68, eds. C. G. Müller-Th. Kiessling (1821), p. 193. (In subsequent notes this work will be referred to as Metochites, *Miscellanea*.)

¹⁸ Cantac., *Hist.*, I, pp. 185, lines 9 and 17-19; 344, line 21-345, line 1; II, pp. 54, line 14; 244, lines 18-19; 251, lines 12-14; I, p. 345, lines 18-19.

¹⁹ Cf. my "Alexios Makrembolites and his 'Dialogue between the Rich and the Poor,'" *Zbornik radova Srpske akademije nauka*, LXV-Vizantološki institut, Knj. 6 (1960), p. 213, lines 12-19. (In subsequent notes this article will be quoted as *Makrembolites*.)

²⁰ Demetrius Cydones, *Apologia*, ed. G. Mercati, *Notizie di Procoro e Demetrio Cidone . . .* (= *Studie Testi*, 56 [1931]), p. 370, lines 30-33. German translation by H. G. Beck, *Ostkirchliche Studien*, I (1952), p. 217. (In subsequent notes the first of these works will be referred to as Mercati, *Notizie*, and the second, as Beck.)

about our state, Cydones asked, if in reality our so-called subjects work for the Turk and our emperors serve him and live by his command?²¹

It would be pointless to multiply examples of such texts. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the main changes that occur in them concern reports of what was still left to the Empire, not comparisons with the past or evaluations of the present. In the spring of 1352 Philotheus, the future patriarch of Constantinople, enumerated the territories lost by Byzantium up to that time and referred to ten or twenty cities which still were in Byzantine hands but which were at their last gasp.²² About three-quarters of a century later the great Pletho reminded Theodore II, Despot of the Peloponnesus, of the past greatness of Byzantium and made a similar inventory. By then he could come up with only two cities in Thrace, parts of the Peloponnesus, and a small island or two.²³

Byzantine intellectuals looking at their country and at themselves now spoke of "remains," "small remnants," "dregs," "refuse," of the great Roman Empire, of the Romans or of the Hellenes—all of which terms are direct quotations.²⁴ Their present state was the more sorry since the point of reference was not only Byzantium at the time of its greatness but also Roman and Greek antiquity.

The first part of our main question has been answered: Byzantine intellectuals did express their awareness of the Empire's political decay. Admittedly, this showed no great insight, for their world was indeed collapsing. For purposes of illustration, I shall refer to the years around the middle of the fourteenth century. To realize the degree of Byzantium's difficulties at that time, one has only to open the History of Nicephorus Gregoras and the Memoirs of the former

²¹ Cf. Mercati, *Notizie*, pp. 374, lines 41–52, 57–58; 374, line 62–375, line 2; Beck, pp. 220–1.

²² Philotheus Kokkinos, *Letter to the Inhabitants of Heracleia*, eds. C. Triantafyllis-A. Grapputo, *Anecdota graeca e codicibus mss. Bibliothecae S. Marci* (1874), p. 43. Cf. Nic. Greg., *Hist.*, II, pp. 816, line 20–817, line 7, Bonn, where these words are put in the mouth of Cantacuzenus: the Empire's territory is practically limited to Thrace; its few cities have no hinterland and are seething with social unrest. Cf. p. 883, lines 16–17, Bonn: Byzantine territory not bigger than Thrace in 1351.

²³ Συμβουλευτικός πρὸς τὸν δεσπότην Θεόδωρον . . . , ed. Lampros, ΠΠ, 4 (1930), p. 129, lines 12–17. Writing soon after 1405, Johannes Chortasmenos, a scholar and a bibliophile, remarked that prior to the battle of Ankara (1402) Byzantine affairs were at such an ebb, that almost the only place from which the Empire could collect revenue at that time was Constantinople itself. Cf. the passage in *Vind. Suppl. Gr.* 75, fol. 264^r, ed. H. Hunger, *Wiener Archiv für Geschichte des Slaventums und Ost-europas*, 3 (1959), p. 157, note 22. Some years later (about 1422?) Chortasmenos read the historians Nicetas Choniates and Johannes Cinnamus in *Vat. Gr.* 163 and compared his own times with those recorded in the texts he was reading. Next to a passage of Choniates (= 510, Bonn), describing the use of the Greek fire, Chortasmenos wrote in his own hand (fol. 175^r): ποῦ νῦν τὸ ὑγρὸν τοῦτο πῦρ; καὶ θαῦμα μέγα, πῶς ἡ τοῦτου κατασκευὴ τὴν τῶν Βενετῶν μάλιστ' ἀγνώσιν διέφυγε. Next to another passage (= 529, Bonn) referring to a window in the Blachernae Palace, he remarked (fol. 177^r): οἶα ἦσαν ποτὲ τὰ παλάτια τῶν Βλαχερνῶν, καὶ οἶα νῦν γέγονασιν: φεῦ τῆς συμφορᾶς. Cf. the remark on fol. 233^r, starting with the words περὶ τοῦ κάστρου τῆς Κωνσταντινουπόλεως, οἷον ἦν τότε καὶ οἷον ἔστι νῦν. This last remark is published; ed., e.g., Sp. Lampros, *Νέος Ἑλληνομνημῶν*, 5 (1908), pp. 260–261.

²⁴ The words used are λείψανα, ἐλλείμματα, ὑποστάθμη, σκύβαλα. Cf. Metochites, *Miscellanea*, § 1, p. 14; § 38, p. 240; Nic. Greg., *Hist.*, II, p. 817, line 1, Bonn; Michael Apostolis, ed. H. Noiret, *Lettres inédites de Michel Apostolis* . . . , pp. 114; 151, line 29; ed. B. Laourdas in *Ἐπετηρίς Ἑταιρείας Βυζαντινῶν Σπουδῶν*, 19 (1949), p. 243, line 25; anonymous *Dirge on the Despot Theodore II*, ed. Lampros, Π Π, IV (1930), p. 177, line 1; Georgius (Gennadius) Scholarius *Oeuvres complètes* . . . , eds. L. Petit, M. Jugie, X. A. Siderides, III (1930), p. 127, lines 13–14. (In subsequent notes this edition will be referred to as Scholarius, *Oeuvres*.)

Emperor Cantacuzenus. Portions of these works read like the last books of Sholokhov's "Quiet Flows the Don," with their accounts of daring raids and fatal ambushes executed by small partisan groups. The raids and ambushes described by Cantacuzenus were operations on a miniature scale. The Emperor himself was sometimes menaced with captivity, for his squadron on occasion numbered only fifty or sixty warriors.²⁵ In 1337, the Turks unexpectedly overran the region of Constantinople, and for its defense in this emergency the Empire was able to mobilize no more than sixty or seventy knights—with retainers, we hope, though we are not so told— and three unarmed ships.²⁶ In 1343, because of Turkish incursions at harvest time and the interruption of the food supply from the Black Sea coast, famine spread in Constantinople and Thracian cities,²⁷ and in 1346 the fields were not tilled on account of raids by various enemies. Cities were deserted, the economic life came to a standstill, the poor were unemployed, and sources of revenue thus dried up.²⁸ About 1344, Momčilo, a Bulgarian adventurer, carved out for himself a semi-independent domain from the disintegrating territory of the Empire. His army was made up of bloodthirsty Serbian, Bulgarian, and half-Greek rabble. This force of 2000 men made Momčilo a match for either side in the civil war which at that time was being waged in the Empire.²⁹

Thus the intellectuals could not but be aware of political decay. But, it is said, they expressed no awareness of cultural decadence, for the simple reason that such decadence did not objectively exist in the period of the Palaeologi. There is some truth in this statement. The scholarly discussions at the court of Andronicus II were much more refined than they had been at the court of Nicaea,³⁰ and the names of Cydones, Pletho, and Bessarion are among the most prominent in the history of Byzantine culture. We should judge an army, however, not only by its generals but also by the skills of its noncommissioned officers. In this context the person of Demetrius Raoul Kabakes affords us food for thought. In the last decades of the Empire's existence this man was an important landlord in the Peloponnesus and later became a high official at the court of Constantinople. He belonged to the circle of Pletho, collected esoteric texts in which this group was interested, had Ciriaco of Ancona draw an elephant in his scrapbook, and boasted of being a descendant of the wise

²⁵ Cantac., *Hist.*, II, pp. 415, line 18–418, line 4; 429, line 11–431, line 24, Bonn.

²⁶ Nic. Greg., *Hist.*, I, p. 540, lines 1–5, Bonn.

²⁷ Nic. Greg., *Hist.*, II, p. 683, lines 5–13, Bonn.

²⁸ Nic. Greg., *Hist.*, II, pp. 751, line 22–752, line 6, Bonn.

²⁹ Nic. Greg., *Hist.*, II, p. 704, lines 12–22, Bonn. Other texts in St. P. Kyriakides, *Βυζαντινὰ μελέται*, VII. 'Ο Μομτζίλος καὶ τὸ κράτος του, *Μακεδονικά*, 2 (1950), pp. 332–345.

³⁰ In 1241, Georgius Acropolites, then a young man of 21, discussed the causes of solar eclipses in front of the imperial couple, John Vatatzes and Empress Irene. (*Hist.*, § 39 = pp. 62, line 17–64, line 5 ed. Heisenberg). He admits that he did not know exactly what these causes were, but states that he managed to repeat what he had learned about them from Nicephorus Blemmydes. Even Acropolites' rudimentary explanation must have been found too daring, for it was challenged by the court physician, "an ignoramus in philosophy." In the heat of the argument, Acropolites was even called *μωρός* by the Empress, who, however, later regretted the epithet. Compare this with the level of Gregoras' discussion on the reform of the Calendar, which took place at the court of Andronicus II about 1325. Cf. Nic. Greg., *Hist.*, I, pp. 364, line 3–373, line 13, Bonn; *idem*, *Letter to Cabasilas*, ed. St. Bezdeki, *Ephemeris Dacoromana*, 2 (1924), pp. 330–336.

Theodore Metochites.³¹ But his spelling was atrocious and his style lowly. Having heard a laudatory appreciation of Metochites which went back to Pletho, he recorded it in a form which may be freely translated to read: "As far as commentators of Ptolemy, Pletho sez let them say what they want, nobody's got within a mile of Metochites the great logothete."³²

Curiously enough, many Byzantine intellectuals of the Palaeologian period did not share the optimism of modern Byzantinists. Express criticisms of Byzantine culture occurred half a century after the first laments over political decline. But signs of a cultural malaise appeared a generation earlier.

Theodore Metochites deplored the fact that neither he nor his contemporaries were able to exercise their literary talents, for all subjects, secular or sacred, had already been treated by others. His generation of late-comers was left with nothing original to say.³³ This insight into the disadvantages of a culture burdened with too brilliant a tradition is remarkable, considering that this culture was the writer's own. But there was nothing optimistic in declaring that the creative possibilities of Byzantine literature had been spent.

Fear of sterility only implied awareness of decline. Cydones was the first author of the fourteenth century who expressly pointed to the decadence of literary and theological studies in the Byzantium of his day and who said that only the indigent and unlettered still looked to the Empire for guidance.³⁴ The most eloquent text, however, comes from fifteenth-century Constantinople. Before the Union of Florence the future Patriarch Gennadius Scholarius—for polemical purposes to be sure—assessed the level of the capital's cultural élite and was appalled. He found that only a few people (he says three or four) were devoting themselves to the pursuit of learning and that even these were concerned with appearances rather than substance. The study of elementary grammar transformed them into grammarians; avoidance of solecisms turned them into rhetoricians; their mumblings about genera and species earned them the title of philosophers; their rattling off of patristic texts caused the crowd to worship them as divinely inspired theologians. This was bad enough. Scholarius only wished that these ignoramuses would leave successors who would be no worse than themselves, but feared, instead, that they might die without leaving any successors at all. Soon the Byzantines, while living in what had formerly

³¹ Kabakes at the court of Constantinople: Letter of *hieromonachos* Gabriel to *archon* Kabakes, in *Mutinensis 144* (α. T. 8. 12), fol. 181^v: the addressee has moved to Constantinople, where he is *ὑπηρετῶν βασιλεῖ καὶ οἰκίας ἐπιμελούμενος*. Kabakes member of the senatorial class: cf. *Vat. Gr. 1293*, fol. 419^r, quoted in Νέος Ἑλληνομνήμων, 4 (1907), p. 331. Elephant: in *Mutinensis 144*, fol. 179^v, where Kabakes wrote above the picture and its caption: τοῦ Ἀγκονιτάνου Κυριακοῦ οἰκηόχειρα ἀμφώτεραι. Descent from the Metochites family: Kabakes' letter to his son Manolis, ed., e.g., Sathas, *MB*, I, pp. ρκζ' – ρλα'. Examples of Kabakes' spelling in Νέος Ἑλληνομνήμων, 4 (1907), pp. 331–342; H. Grégoire, *Byzantion*, 5 (1929–1930), pp. 730–736; F. Masai, *Pléthon et le platonisme de Mistra* (1956), pp. 385–386.

³² Autograph note in *Mutinensis 144* (α. T. 8. 12), fol. 147^v: οὗτος ἔφη πρίγκηψ ὁ Χιλᾶς, ἀνὴρ ἐπιστήμων καὶ τήμιος ἄρχων· ὅτι Πλήθων ὁ σοφὸς ἔφη πρὸς αὐτὸν περὶ τῶν ἐξιγαιτῶν τῆς Μεγάλης Συντάξεως· ὁ, τι θέλουν ἄς λέγουν, οὐδὲς ἔφθασεν τὸν μέγαν λογοθέτην τὸν Μετοχίτην. Cf. Νέος Ἑλληνομνήμων, 4 (1907), p. 339.

³³ Metochites, *Miscellanea*, § 1, pp. 13–18; cf. *idem*, Ἠθικός ἢ περὶ παιδείας, *Vind. Phil. Gr.* 95, fol. 201^v: ἐπεὶ καὶ περὶ πάντων ἀκριβέστατα προεῖπον [*sc.* the ancients] καὶ προῦθεντο νόμους καὶ κλήρους αὐτάρκεις, ἀπολαύειν ἀπόνως τοῖς ἐξῆς ἡμῖν· καὶ οὐδὲν οὐτ' ἀνεπίγνωστον, οὐτ' ἄρρητον παρεῖται.

³⁴ Demetrius Cydones, *Apologia*, ed. Mercati, *Notizie*, p. 370, lines 52–54 and 58; Beck, p. 220.

been the center of literary studies, would in no way differ from the barbarians. Soon they would be deprived not only of wisdom and knowledge but even of the mastery of their own tongue.³⁵

The cultural decline of one's own society may be measured by the achievements of another, whose civilization had been considered inferior in former days. When some Byzantines applied the Latin yardstick to themselves, they found their own culture wanting. For men like Cydones, a closer look at the Latin culture brought exhilarating discoveries. The recognition that the Latins had something to offer involved the destruction of most of the shibboleths to which Byzantines had been attached for centuries: for one thing, the world was divided into Byzantines and barbarians, the latter including the Latins;³⁶ for another, as a city, the New Rome was so far superior to the Old that to compare the two would be ridiculous.³⁷ God had chosen the Ancient Greeks to cultivate science; the Gospels and the Epistles were written in Greek for the Greeks;³⁸ all Latin learning was derived from the Greeks; the Latin language was poor and "narrow."³⁹ Even in the process of destroying these shibboleths Cydones proclaimed some aspects of contemporary Latin civilization as superior. You say, he asked the Byzantine traditionalists, that the Latins received culture from us? True, but in so doing, they mastered Aristotle and Plato—now their Muse is more impressive than that of these two philosophers—while you neglected them to the point where you ignorantly assert that the method of dialectical proof is a Latin invention. You are proud of your long-winded Attic style? But the Latins offer the truth in concise language and are better equipped for logical disputation. You find the walls of Constantinople superior to those of Rome? But have you considered the facts? Those who have seen and surveyed the fortifications of both cities report that Rome's walls are longer.⁴⁰

In 1371, Cydones asked the Emperor John V for permission to leave for Italy. In the past, he had profited from Latin writings. Now he wanted to profit

³⁵ Scholarius, *Oeuvres*, IV, pp. 406, lines 22–32; 407, lines 2–12. Some forty years earlier, Joseph Bryennius had already implied that the orthodox party lacked educated leaders. Cf. *Letter to Nicolas Cabasilas*, ed. E. Boulgaris, Ἰωσήφ . . . Βρυεννίου τὰ εὐρεθέντα . . ., III (1784), p. 140: if Cabasilas acts, the orthodox will not have to hide their faces, or mourn the fact that no wise and worldly leader is left to them and that their world is gone and done for (ᾠχετο πάντη τὰ καθ' ἡμᾶς καὶ ἀπόλωλεν). Johannes Chortasmenos regrets that Science and Fortune had left Attica and moved to Italy: *Letter to Demetrius Pepagomenus*, summarized by H. Hunger, *Wiener Archiv für Geschichte des Slaventums und Osteuropas*, III (1959), p. 155.

³⁶ Criticism of this traditional viewpoint in Demetrius Cydones, *Apologia*, ed. Mercati, *Notizie*, p. 365, lines 77–81. Beck, p. 213.

³⁷ Theodore Metochites, Βυζάντιος ἢ περὶ τῆς βασιλίδος μεγαλοπόλεως, *Vind. Phil. Gr.* 95, fol. 301^r: 'Ρώμη δ' ἐκείνη προτέρα καὶ μεγαλόνημος, ἤττηται μὲν καὶ αὕτη τοῦ τῆσδε μεγέθους τῆς πόλεως [*sc.* Constantinople], ὡς καὶ πᾶσαι ἤττηται δὲ τῆς κατὰ θεσιν εὐκαιρίας τοῦ τόπου . . . Fol. 301^v: τίς δ' ὥστε καὶ παραβάλλειν ὄλως τὰ κείνης [*sc.* Rome] ἐνθάδε μαινοίτ' ἂν οὕτω καὶ ὥστε τοσαύτης ἀνοίας γέλωτ' ὄφλειν.

³⁸ Photius, *Letter to Zachary, Catholicos of Armenia*, ed. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Pravoslavnyj Palestinskij Sbornik*, 31 (1892), p. 185, lines 11–24 (Russian translation by N. Marr, *ibidem*, pp. 233–234); cf. pp. 183, line 10–186, line 26 (Russian translation, pp. 231–235) on God's preference for the Greeks and on the supremacy of Greek culture, both pagan and Christian.

³⁹ Georgius Acropolites, *Second Speech on the Procession of the Holy Ghost from the Father*, II, p. 64, lines 14–15, ed. Heisenberg. Texts on τὸ στενὸν of the Latin language are quoted by A. Michel, "Sprache und Schisma," *Festschrift Kardinal Faulhaber* . . . (1949), pp. 46–47.

⁴⁰ Demetrius Cydones, *Apologia*, ed. Mercati, *Notizie*, pp. 366, lines 90–99; 372, lines 76–80; 389, lines 62–65; 393, lines 62–66; 402, lines 74–78; Beck, pp. 214; 219; 271; 274; 282. *Letter 103*, ed. R. J. Loenertz, *Demetrius Cydonès, Correspondance* (= Studi e Testi, 186 [1956]), p. 141, lines 63–67.

from direct contacts with "people who are capable of improving those who associate with them."⁴¹

The second stage in the acquaintance of the Byzantines with Latin culture led to the open admission of Latin superiority. In his memoir on reforms addressed to the future Constantine XII, Bessarion spoke bluntly. The culture of the Byzantines, so high in the past, had sunk so low that they were considered ignorant by foreigners. The wisdom and technological know-how of the Byzantines had disappeared, but it survived to a great extent among the Latins. In order to raise the level of culture, education, and technology in the Peloponnese, Constantine should invite Latin specialists there and send a small group of Greek students to Italy. These half dozen students—he specifies four to eight—should not be too young, nor should they be too old, for otherwise it would be difficult for them to learn a foreign language. Their program of study should be technological: metallurgy, mechanics, armaments, shipbuilding; the manufacture of what we would today call consumer goods might be looked into also, but this was less important.⁴² All of Bessarion's proposals must have sounded strange to some members of the Byzantine upper classes. When *they* were young, they had had to memorize the elegant periods of Aelius Aristides and Libanius, not a manual on shipbuilding, in order to qualify for important positions. Therefore Bessarion had to temper his advice. He explained that no loss of face was involved in learning from the Latins. First of all, the Byzantines would only be receiving back what they had given them in the past. Secondly, it was silly to be ashamed of acquiring wisdom. If the Latins had been ashamed of receiving culture from the Byzantines long before, they would never have reached the cultural eminence which they were now enjoying.⁴³

Both Cydones and Bessarion were champions of the Union of Churches. But the anti-Unionists, too, were convinced that the situation of the past had been reversed and that the Byzantines of their day were no match for their Latin counterparts. Before the Council of Florence, Pletho had little hope for an Orthodox victory in the conciliar disputes. After the Council, he did say that he had no fear the Latins might vanquish the Byzantines in discussions on the Procession of the Holy Ghost,⁴⁴ but by insisting on this point, he betrayed his own doubts. Scholarius, also writing after the Council, was more outspoken. He advised against any further involvement with the Latins, more erudite than the Byzantines (τοὺς Λατίνους σοφωτέρους ὄντας ἡμῶν), since his contemporaries could not begin to measure up to the immediately preceding generation of intellectuals. Besides, it would be insane for his generation of nonentities (τοὺς μηδένας ἡμᾶς), weak in matters of culture, to question the decisions sanctified by the assent of the mighty minds of the past who lived when the Byzantine nation was great, powerful, and earnest in its search for the Good.⁴⁵

⁴¹ *Speech to John V Palaeologus*, ed. R. J. Loenertz, *Demetrius Cydonès, Correspondance*, p. 22, lines 4-16, esp. 9-10.

⁴² Ed. Lampros, ΠΠ, IV (1930), pp. 42, lines 5-10 and 21-25; 43, lines 1-7, 12-17; 44, lines 5-24.

⁴³ Ed. Lampros, ΠΠ, IV (1930), p. 42, lines 29-34.

⁴⁴ Pletho, Πρὸς τὸ ὑπὲρ τοῦ λατινικοῦ δόγματος βιβλίον, Migne, PG, 160, col. 979B.

⁴⁵ Scholarius, *Oeuvres*, III, pp. 85, lines 1-10; 92, lines 13-29.

The second part of our main question has been answered. Rightly or wrongly—and I think rightly—Byzantine intellectuals did express their awareness of the Empire's cultural decay.

Confrontation with the West led some Byzantines to the recognition of Latin cultural superiority; confrontation with the East posed a different problem for them. There was no Turkish culture. According to Metochites, by 1294 the frontier of civilization in the East coincided with the line of settlements organized along the Sangarios River in Bithynia. The wilderness beyond, that is, the lands which were in the hands of various Turkish emirs, was inhabited by creatures about whom the only human thing were their malformed bodies. All laws of polity and all bonds of society were absent from that wilderness.⁴⁶ The motif of opposition between the Turks, who were mere beasts if not worse, and the Byzantines, who were human beings and descendants of Greeks and Romans, lived as long as the Empire itself: thus it was put forth in Constantine XII's last speech, pronounced some twelve hours before the fall of the City.⁴⁷ The religion of these beasts was sheer abomination. And yet they advanced from one conquest to another. How could that be?

To the Turks themselves, the answer appeared simple. Their successes were a miracle which confirmed the supernatural character of Mohammed's mission. It is known, so runs the Turkish reasoning, that God bestows favors and honors on those whom he loves, and inflicts punishment and humiliation on those from whom he averts his face. We see that we and other Moslems are thriving, while you Christians are experiencing defeat on all fronts. It clearly follows that Mohammed's faith is better than Christ's.⁴⁸ If you Christians are so right about

⁴⁶ Theodore Metochites, Βασιλικὸς δεῦτερος, *Vind. Phil. Gr.* 95, fol. 154^r: settlements on the Sangarios seem to the author πόλιν οὖσαν μίαν τε καὶ μεγίστην . . . ἐν ἧ ζύμπαντα ὁμοῦ συνῆλθε καλῶν εἶδη καὶ νόμων ἰσότης . . . καὶ πάσης εὐπορία τέχνης καὶ λόγων φορὰ . . . καὶ . . . χάριτος ἢ μεγίστη καὶ καλλίστη πόλις αὕτη πλέως ἑλληνικῆς. Τὰ δ' ἐπέκεινα [sc. Turkish lands beyond] . . . τάδε μὴ εἶναι . . . θῖνες ἄνδρῳ καὶ θηριώδεις . . . θηριώδεις . . . ἀγοραὶ καὶ νομαὶ . . . ὄχλος μόνον ἄναρχος, ἀτακτος, οὐδὲν ἴσον . . . φύσεως ἀμαρτία . . . [fol. 154^v] ὕλης ἀνίδεος [leg. ἀνείδεος] χύσις καὶ χρόνου καὶ γῆς ὕβρις. The barbarians inhabiting the land "beyond" δίκην οὐ νομίζουσι, πολιτείαν οὐκ ἴσασι, . . . πᾶσαν βίου παρασκευὴν καὶ συνθήκην, ἀρχῆς ἀρμονίαν καὶ σύνταξιν . . . μορφαῖς μόνον ἄνθρωποι καὶ ταύταις ἀλλόκοτοι ὥσπερ τὰ φαῦλα νομίσματα παραχαρattuσῆς τῆς κοινῆς πλάσεως. If only the Turks were civilized, and not split into many emirates! Then it would have been easy to deal with them. Fol. 155^r: ἀν δέ τις αἰεὶ τέμνη καὶ πᾶσαν ἐπιχείρησιν ἀξιοί, πάρεστιν αἰεὶ χρῆσθαι κἀνταῦθα ἢ τῆς ὕλης πρὸς ἐπίδοσιν ἀκμῆ—καὶ τοῦτό ἐστιν αὐτῆς αἰ τῆς ὕδρας ἀδαπάνητος κεφαλαί—καὶ πολυαρχία. κἀν μὲν γε πρὸς ἐστῶσαν ἦν ἡγεμονίαν ἢ σπουδὴ καὶ ἡρμοσμένην ἐνὶ γε τῷ δήπου τρόπῳ, οὐδὲν ἂν ἦν πρᾶγμα τέλος εὐρέσθαι. Metochites puts his finger on one of the chief difficulties in Byzantino-Turkish relations.

⁴⁷ Ps.-Sphrantzes, *Hist.* (= *Maius*), p. 275, lines 3–9, Bonn. German translation by E. von Ivanka, *Die letzten Tage von Konstantinopel* (= *Byzantinische Geschichtsschreiber*, I [1954]), p. 71. Another edition by G. Th. Zoras, in *Εὐχαριστήριον, Τιμητικὸς τόμος . . . Ἀ. Σ. Ἀλιβιζάτου* (1958), pp. 109–110 (who conveniently publishes the three versions of the *Speech*). In spite of the compilatory character of the *Maius*, the *Speech* does reflect the situation of 1453 or thereabouts.

⁴⁸ Joseph Bryennius, *Μετὰ ἀπίστου διάλεξις, Vallicellianus Gr.* 27 (B. 128), fol. 149^v (the Infidel is speaking): ἀλλ' ἴσμεν ὅτι ὃν ὁ Θεὸς ἀγαπᾷ, εὐεργετῆι τοῦτον, πληθύνει, τιμᾷ· ὃν δ' ἀποστρέφεται καὶ μισεῖ, λιμιοῖ, ἐλαττοῖ, κατασιχύνει· ὁρῶμεν οὖν τὸ τήμερον, ὅτι τὸ τῶν Ἰσλαμηλιτῶν γένος (καὶ εἴ τι ἄλλο τῷ Μωάμεθ νόμῳ στοιχεῖ) εὐπραγεῖ, εὐημεροῖ, εὐτυχεῖ, ὑμεῖς δὲ τὸ τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἔθνος πάντα πάσχετε τάναντια. ὅθεν ἐστιν οὐ τεκμαίρεσθαι, ἀλλ' ἐναργῶς πιστεῦναι, ὅτι κρείττων ἢ εἰς τὸν προφήτην πίστις τῆς εἰς τὸν Χριστὸν πίστεως. (In subsequent notes this text will be referred to as Bryennius, *Διάλεξις*.) On occasion, Bryennius would turn this "Turkish" argument against the Latins. Cf. *Λόγος συμβουλευτικὸς περὶ τῆς ἐνώσεως*, ed. E. Boulgaris, I (1768), pp. 476–477: If you measure the truth of a Faith by worldly success, then the Agarenes and Ismaelites are more pious than ourselves; more than that: they are

your beliefs, why are you beaten? —Such is the standard argument which, in one variant or another, recurs in the polemics of the time. Gregory Palamas was confronted with one version at the discussion which was held during his captivity in Nicaea in 1355;⁴⁹ Turkish soldiers shouted another version at the defenders of Constantinople during the siege of 1422; the argument was put into the mouth of the Turk in various dialogues between “Faith and Unbelief.”⁵⁰

There were several answers to this argument. The simplest, the most frequent—and the dullest—was to make the sins of the Byzantines—not the merits of Islam—responsible for Turkish victories. There were other rebuttals, more sophisticated than mere repetitions of the theme that catastrophes occurred διὰ τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν. It is true, granted Palamas, that Mohammed, who started far in the East, had now extended his rule as far west as the setting sun. But his victories were made up of bloodshed, rapine, and enslavement, none of which could have derived from God. There is a difference between spiritual and military conquest. In the past, other rulers had conquered the world by force: Alexander the Great, for example, who moved from West to East. Here was a gentle reminder that in former ages the Greeks had been superior to the predecessors of the Turks.⁵¹

You infidels maintain that Islam is the true faith since it has conquered almost the whole of Christianity—said Joseph Bryennius about 1400, and continued: this is, in fact, wrong, for the Christians still greatly outnumber the Moslems. He then gave a list of twenty-eight Christian peoples, including the nations of the Latin West. His list was somewhat padded, for the Germans appear in it three times, as *Sasoi*, as *Germanoi* and as *Tudeskoi*, but he made his point. As for the Byzantines, their enslavement came from the fact that their religion was superior to that of the other Christians. Knowing this, the Devil had singled them out as the special target of his hatred.⁵²

even better than you Latins, who brag so much about your prosperity; were you not beaten at Nicopolis? Cf. the same argument in the *Letter to Maximos the Dominican*, ed. E. Boulgaris, III (1784), p. 150. There was a way out of the difficulty. One had only to divorce the question of religious truth from that of political success. This was done (when?) in Ps.-Sphrantzes, *Hist.* (= *Maius*), pp. 312–313, Bonn.

⁴⁹ Cf. Palamas' *Letter to David Dishypatos*, ed. M. Treu, *Δελτίον τῆς ἱστορικῆς καὶ ἐθνολογικῆς Ἐταιρείας τῆς Ἑλλάδος*, 3 (1889–1891), p. 233 (Mohammed victorious).

⁵⁰ Siege of 1422: Iohannes Cananus, *Narratio*, p. 468, lines 7–9, Bonn (Where is your God, you benighted Romans? Where is your Christ? Where are your Saints to assist you? Tomorrow we shall take the City). Dialogues: Alexios Makrembolites, *Διάλογος πίστεως καὶ ἀπιστίας, Sabbaiticus Gr. 417*, fol. 70^r (Unbelief is speaking): ὁρῶ γὰρ τοὺς ἐμοὶ προσερχομένους καὶ γησιῶς δουλεύοντας μηδέποτε ἄνιστον ὑπὲρ οὐδενός, μηδ' ἄχαρι ὑπομένοντας, ἀλλ' αἰεὶ κατατρυφῶντας . . . καὶ φονεύοντας αἰεὶ καὶ μοιχεύοντας, καὶ τάλλῳτρια συλλήβδην ὀσημέρια ἀρπάζοντας, τοὺς δ' ἐπὶ σοὶ [*sc.* Faith] πεποιθότας . . . ὑπὸ συμφορῶν ἀνηκέστων αἰεὶ μεμαστιγμένους, Bryennius, *Διάλεξις*, fol. 149^r (the Infidel is speaking): διὰ τὴ δὲ μὴ τοῦ Μωάμεθ τὴν ἔλευσιν ἐνεπόδισεν ὁ Χριστός; ἔλθων γὰρ οὗτος σχεδὸν τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἀνέτρεψε.

⁵¹ *Letter to David Dishypatos*, as in note 49.

⁵² Bryennius, *Διάλεξις*, fol. 149^r: ἔχονται τῆς εἰς Χριστὸν πίστεως τῶν ἡμῖν ἐγνωσμένων ἐθνῶν Ἴνδοι καὶ Αἰθίοπες, οἱ τοσοῦτοι εἰσι τῷ πλήθει, ὡς μόνον παραβάλλεσθαι πρὸς τὴν λοιπὴν οἰκουμένην· οὐ μόνον δὲ ἐκείνοι, ἀλλὰ καὶ σύν αὐτοῖς Ῥωμαῖοι, Μέγχοι, Χαλδαῖοι, Σύριοι καὶ μέρος Περσῶν, Ἀρμένιοι, Ἰβηρες, Κόλχοι, Ἀλανοὶ, Ἀβασγοὶ, Γότθοι, Βούλγαροι, Τριβακ(λ)οὶ, Βόλχοι, Ἰλυριοὶ [*sic*] καὶ Ἀλβανίται, Ῥῶσοι, Σάσοι, Οὐν(κ)οὶ καὶ Γερμανοὶ, Λογγιβάρδοι, Τουδέσκοι, Σπάνιοι, Γαλάται, πάντες οἱ τὰς Βρεττανικὰς νήσους οἰκοῦντες, καὶ Ἴταλοὶ, καὶ ἕτεροι· τρία δὲ μόνον ἔθνη ἀλογίᾳ συλῶντα καὶ πρότερον, κατὰ κράτος ἐκείνῳ [*sc.* Mohammed] δεδούλωται· Σαρακηνοὶ, Ἰσμαηλίται καὶ Σκύθαι . . . [fol. 149^v]: πάντα τὰ προειρημένα ἔθνη πιστεύει μὲν εἰς Χριστὸν, οὐ τοσοῦτον δὲ τῶν καλῶν ἐπιμέλειται· τὸ δ' ἡμέτερον, ὑπὲρ πάντα . . . ἐξ ὧν οἱ δαίμονες πρὸς φθόνον ἐρεθιζόμενοι, ἔθνη τὰ τοὺς πολέμους θέλοντα κατ' αὐτοῦ ἐπεγεύρουσι. Cf. fol. 149^r: οὐδὲν [*sc.* no other nation] . . . φθονουμένη πρὸς τῶν δαιμόνων οὕτω πίστιν ἐκτήσατο.

Bryennius was a rabid anti-Unionist who unfavorably compared the intolerant policy of the Western Church on Greek territories subject to Latin domination with the religious tolerance of the Turks. He must have been short of ammunition if he had to enlist the support of the Spaniards, Longobards, Britons, and Italians in refuting the Turkish argument. The difficulty of the Byzantine position lay in the fact that the Byzantines, too, believed that a true religion should assure the flourishing of an Empire. This conviction was a part of the imperial idea and was expressed, for all to read, in imperial addresses to the Fathers of the Oecumenical Councils.⁵³ Lengthy disquisitions on the theme “whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth,” pushed this belief into the background but could not obliterate it.

If one held such a belief consistently, one had to assume, as did a doubter of the mid-fourteenth century and many nameless apostates, that Turkish advances might be proof that Islam was the true faith.⁵⁴ And if not Islam as a whole, then at least some of its tenets, such as the strong belief in Providence. Pletho, for example, poured scorn on those who supported the Union of Churches for purely political reasons. By their passion for this *combinazione* they implied that God did not take care of human affairs. It was no wonder that He had exalted the infidels and humbled the Byzantines; for it was obvious that the Turks held a much sounder opinion of God’s Providence than did the Byzantines.⁵⁵

But one could also make an inference which was less radical, though still favorable to the Moslem barbarians. If calamities were a retribution for the moral transgressions of the Byzantines, if their rulers were unjust, their administrators rapacious, their judges corrupt, their mediators false, their city-dwellers fraudulent, their peasants stupid, and all of them, taken together, utterly worthless⁵⁶—then the flourishing of the Moslems was due to their higher morality. The attitude of Alexius Makrembolites towards the Turks reflects this argument, and this writer, whom I have already quoted earlier, explained the thriving of the godless by their innate moral superiority to the Byzantines. In spite of their abominable faith, many Turks, he said, were like true Christians in their way of life and lacked only the name of Christian. On the other hand, the deeds of Makrembolites’ compatriots were wicked; they mistreated the poor and consorted with godless sinners—acts which the Moslem Tartars, for instance, would never commit. Compared to the acts of

⁵³ Ed. Schwartz, *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum*, II, I, I (1933), p. 8, lines 28–30 (letter of Marcian); p. 29, lines 8–11 (letter of Pulcheria); p. 68, lines 3–10 (letter of Theodosius II and Valentinian III); II, I, 2 (1933), p. 55, lines 4–6 (letter of Marcian); cf. III (1940), p. 189, lines 21–26 (address of Justinian I). The argument that the Christian religion must be true since Christians rule over the whole world, occurs in the eighth-century version of the anti-Jewish dialogue Ἀντιβολή Παπίσκου, ed. A. C. McGiffert, *Dialogue Between a Christian and a Jew* (1889), pp. 61, lines 16–18; 62, lines 3–4 and 17–19.

⁵⁴ Cf. Alexius Makrembolites, Ἀποδείξεις ὅτι διὰ τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν εἰς προνομίην καὶ αἰχμαλωσίαν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ἐξεδόθημεν . . . , *Sabbaiticus Gr.* 417, fol. 21^v (scholion next to title): πρὸς τινὰ ἀντιρρητι <κός> τὸν τὰς ἀ<γίας> ἰκόνας [sic] αἰχμαλώτους ἰδόντα καὶ ὑπὸ τοῦ λογισμοῦ ἐνοχληθῆναι [sic] ὡς ἔλεγεν ὀρθοῦν εἶναι τὸ δόγμα ὃ οἱ τῆς Ἄγαρ πρεσβεύουσιν.

⁵⁵ Πρὸς τὸ ὑπὲρ τοῦ λατινικοῦ δόγματος βιβλίον, Migne, PG, 160, col. 980.

⁵⁶ Joseph Bryennius, Τίνας αἰτίαι τῶν καθ’ ἡμᾶς λυπηρῶν, ed. L. Oeconomos, *Mélanges Ch. Diehl*, I (1930), p. 228.

social injustice committed by the Byzantines, the sacrilegious crimes of the Turks were less worthy of blame. Being ignorant barbarians, the Turks destroyed only painted icons, pieces of wood; by exploiting the poor, the Byzantines harmed the living icons of God.⁵⁷

Makrembolites' Turks were remote—and unintended—replicas of the Hellenistic noble barbarians whom he endowed with Christian virtues, not to praise them, but to put his compatriots to shame. Such is the function of noble barbarians in all literatures.

Did any prominent Byzantine before the fall of Constantinople attribute the growth of the Turkish power to natural, rather than to religious or moral, causes? For the fifteenth century, the rule is: if an unusual statement is needed, consult the writings of Pletho. When, in the second decade of that century, Pletho advocated the introduction of internal reforms in the Peloponnesus, he twice held up the Turkish example to Byzantine rulers: the formidable barbarians owed their successes to their internal organization. Whatever its flaws in other respects, the state organization of the Turks favored military efforts and was singularly adapted to the pursuit of an expansionist policy.⁵⁸ The inference was clear: in order to contain the Turk and to vanquish the Latin princes of the Peloponnesus, one should rebuild the Byzantine state from within and organize an efficient national army. Pletho's two incidental remarks are not much, but they are enough to show that not all Byzantines were like his younger contemporary Joseph Bryennius, who attributed the political plight of his compatriots to such sinful practices as consulting Jewish doctors or sleeping naked in bed.⁵⁹

Byzantine intellectuals did more than reassess their own culture and castigate the morals of their own society. Under the impact of changing reality, they rearranged their ideas of the historical process. In the writings of the last two centuries of the Empire, some new concepts appeared, some old motifs began to occur with greater frequency, and some views on Byzantium's place in the scheme of world history underwent a change. Byzantium was no longer a final stage in this scheme, but merely one of the Empires obeying the universal law of creation and destruction.

When the straw men set up by Cydones in the 1360's spoke of a flourishing New Rome, they were only repeating a worn-out cliché. That the New Rome (this name stood for Constantinople, but sometimes it meant the whole Byzantine Empire) was youthful and had outshone the Old, had been stated as early as the sixth century.⁶⁰ This concept found its most confident expression in

⁵⁷ This paragraph has been borrowed from my *Makrembolites*, p. 196. For textual quotations, cf. *ibidem*, notes 59–62. Even Joseph Bryennius had to admit that some Moslems led virtuous lives: Διάλεξις, fol. 152^r.

⁵⁸ Pletho, *Memoir for Theodore Palaeologus*, ed. Lampros ΠΠ, IV (1930), p. 118, lines 2–5; *Letter to Manuel II*, *ibidem*, III (1926), p. 310, lines 7–11.

⁵⁹ Joseph Bryennius, ed. L. Oeconomus, *Mélanges Ch. Diehl*, I (1930), p. 227. If Bryennius was a bigot, he was a well-read one. The eleventh Canon of the Quinisext Council forbids that priests and laymen receive treatment from Jewish doctors.

⁶⁰ Paulus Silentiarius, *Descriptio S. Sophiae*, lines 164–167, ed. P. Friedländer, *Johannes von Gaza und Paulus Silentiarius* . . . (1912), pp. 231–232.

the often quoted lines of the twelfth-century chronicler Constantine Manasses who contrasted Rome, sacked in the year 455, with the blossoming, growing, and youthful "Rome of ours," that is, twelfth-century Byzantium.⁶¹ He also praised the New Rome as the never-aging city, "the one without wrinkles."⁶² Wrinkles appeared on the face of New Rome immediately after the catastrophe of 1204. Nicetas Choniates found this face, recently so red-cheeked and fair to look upon, now suddenly sagging and furrowed with deep wrinkles.⁶³ He was not yet referring to the Empire's senility but to the suddenness with which that enchanting maiden of yesterday had been destroyed. However, in 1295 a panegyrist of the co-Emperor Michael IX saw in the wrinkles on Byzantium's face a result not of a sudden calamity but of an organic process. Not only did the body move toward old age with the passage of time, he reflected, but also the state lost its youthfulness with time, and, in a sense, became disfigured with wrinkles.⁶⁴ In one version of the speech which Constantine XII delivered on the eve of the Turks' final assault, Constantinople of the olden days was likened to a budding wild rose. This nostalgic reference implied that the city had withered at the approach of the final hour.⁶⁵

The weary feeling that the hour was late goes back to the early fourteenth century. Metochites was obsessed with the idea that he lived "late in time," "at a late point in mankind's life," "in the last age," "among the dregs of human affairs."⁶⁶ Describing the civil wars raging all over the world in 1343-1344, Gregoras saw the whole earth grown old with evil. He hoped that God would sweep it clean and thus prepare the rule of peace "at this late point in time."⁶⁷ This motif breaks through the clatter of panegyrics of the fifteenth century. Michael Apostolis praised John VIII for instilling confidence in his subjects, so that now, at this late hour, their thinking had become worthy of themselves and of freedom.⁶⁸ John Argyropoulos welcomed Constantine XII as the new emperor and hoped that Constantine's subjects would, at this late hour, see the light of freedom.⁶⁹

The hour was late. But with respect to what?

⁶¹ Manasses, *Compendium*, verses 2546-8, = 110, Bonn. Manasses' praise of "blossoming" Rome may have been influenced by the precept of the theoretician of eloquence Menander (if a city to be praised is surrounded by others which are old, the encomiast must say that they had decayed through time, while this one is flourishing [ἀνθεῖ]), cf. Spengel, *Rhet. Gr.*, III, p. 350, lines 21-22.

⁶² Manasses, *Compendium*, verses 2350-51 = 102, Bonn.

⁶³ Nic. Chon., *Hist.*, p. 764, lines 3-6, Bonn. *Idem*, Λόγος ἐκδοθεὶς ἐπὶ τῷ ἀναγνωσθῆναι εἰς τὸν Λάσκαριν κύρ Θεόδωρον . . . , ed. Sathas, *MB*, I, p. 128.

⁶⁴ *Ambrosianus Gr. G 14 sup.*, fol. 55^r. Passage excerpted in A. Mai, *Scriptorum veterum nova collectio*, II (1829), p. XXXV. Italian summary by P. Lamma in *Aevum*, 29 (1955), p. 61, note 3.

⁶⁵ Ps.-Sphrantzes, *Hist.* (= *Maius*), p. 276, lines 6-8, Bonn, with an allusion to the Scriptures (Sir. 39:13).

⁶⁶ Metochites, *Miscellanea*, § 1, pp. 13; 14; 16; § 9, p. 68; § 71, p. 473; *idem*, *Poem 2*, verses 204; 231-2, ed. M. Treu, *Dichtungen des Grosslogotheten Theodoros Metochites* (= *Programm des Victoria-gymnasiums* [Potsdam, 1895]); *idem*, Ἐλεγχος (Logos 13), *Vind. Phil. Gr.* 95, fols. 317^v-318^r: ἡμεῖς ὀψέ τῶν χρόνων νῦν ἤκοντες, ὡς περ καὶ ἐν ἄλλοις ἔγωγ' εἰρηκῶς μέμνημαί (allusion to the *Miscellanea*).

⁶⁷ Nic. Greg., *Hist.*, II, p. 687, lines 10-23, Bonn. Cf. *Hist.*, I, p. 242, lines 17-21, Bonn: *Florentios*, p. 490, ed. Jahn. For Joseph Bryennius, the world of his day had reached decrepit old age: ed. E. Boulgaris, I (1768), p. 129; III (1784), p. 116.

⁶⁸ *Address to Constantine XII*, ed. Lampros, ΠΠ, IV (1930), p. 81, lines 5-8.

⁶⁹ Βασιλικός, ed. Sp. Lampros, Ἀργυροπούλεια (1910), p. 47, lines 16-18.

When, at the time of Justinian, Choricus of Gaza alluded to the book of Daniel, he was sure of two things: that there would never be more than five empires and that the present, the last one, was the best and greatest of all.⁷⁰ In the tenth century Andrew, God's fool, otherwise pessimistic, prophesied that Constantinople would last until the end of the world,⁷¹ and in the twelfth, Manasses wished that New Rome might keep growing "until the end."⁷² History had come to a stop with the coming of the Empire, co-eternal with the world. This static conception was satisfactory in prosperous times. But how was it to be applied when the hour came to be late?

The obtuse, the pious, and the conservative, who kept their attachment to the static conception, inferred that the end of the world was coming.

During the reign of Andronicus III some traditionalists expected the end of the Empire because the Emperor did not insist on court etiquette, and some high officials, instead of wearing regulation headgear, appeared at court in Bulgarian, Turkish, and Latin hats.⁷³ At the same time, Gregory Palamas saw the sign of the coming end of the world in the teachings of his adversary, Barlaam.⁷⁴ But the judgment of other observers was more balanced. They recognized signs of the imminent end in natural phenomena, in the bloodshed of the civil wars, in the dearth of good leaders, in the political decline of the Empire, and in social injustice.⁷⁵ Before and after the fall of the Empire, Scholarios was especially fond of collecting evidence on the coming of this "day without evening."⁷⁶ There was logic in this self-centered conception. It was difficult to divorce the end of a Universal Empire from the end of the Universe itself.

Difficult, but not impossible. For some Byzantines the hour was late only in the life of *their* state, one among many.

Metochites knew—and said—that the Roman Empire did *not* encompass the whole *oecumene*, not even at the peak of its might.⁷⁷ In one of his musing moods he reviewed the material of the book of Daniel. His conclusions were empirical, not eschatological. He found that many formerly sovereign nations, which had ruled over many peoples, became enslaved when their turn came. This showed that in the affairs of states there was nothing lasting or eternal. Like organisms, peoples and empires were born, developed, decayed, and died at the time appointed. The whole was not altered in this rhythm of birth, blossoming, and

⁷⁰ *Apolog. Mimorum*, § 69, p. 360, lines 4–5, ed. Foerster (allusion to Daniel 2:39f.). For seventh- and tenth-century references to Constantinople's eternity, cf. N. H. Baynes in *Analecta Bollandiana*, 67 (1950), pp. 171; 177, note 2.

⁷¹ Nicephorus Presbyter, *Vita Andreae Sali*, Migne, PG, 111, col. 853B.

⁷² *Compendium*, verse 2548 = 110, Bonn.

⁷³ Nic. Greg., *Hist.*, I, pp. 566, line 19ff., esp. 567, line 22–568, line 8.

⁷⁴ Nilus Patriarcha, *Encomium Palamae*, Migne, PG, 151, col. 665D.

⁷⁵ For passages from Macrembolites and Gregoras, cf. my *Makrembolites*, pp. 198–199, notes 71–73. Cf. the letter of the Patriarch Athanasius to Andronicus II, *Vat. Gr.* 2219, fol. 13^v: "We should observe justice, temperance, and mercy, or else 'the whole' will perish": εἰ μέλλει μὴ ἀπολέσθαι τὸ πᾶν σὺν ἡμῖν. Ed. N. B. Tomadakes, *Βυζαντινὴ γραμματολογία* (1204–1453), I (1957), p. 125. Justice etc. are virtues with "social" connotations.

⁷⁶ Scholarius, *Oeuvres*, III, pp. 85, lines 6–7; 94, lines 27–28; 139, lines 12–16; 287, lines 8–14; IV, pp. 511, line 29–512, line 3.

⁷⁷ Metochites, *Miscellanea*, § 109, p. 717; cf. § 67, p. 420.

decay but its constituent parts were constantly disappearing. This dance seemed unending, said Metochites, borrowing a simile from Philo; but its participants continually spell each other. There was no exception to the universal law of decline, and the collapse of the Byzantine rule in Asia Minor was only one of its manifestations.⁷⁸

Alexius Makrembolites usually adhered to the eschatological school of history. But he explained the decline of the Empire by the decision of world-governing Providence which transferred sovereignty from one people to another.⁷⁹ This excluded any preference for the Byzantines.

The eschatological and the relativistic views of history could stand side by side on the same folio of a manuscript. The coming end of the world provided the explanation for the sorry state of the Byzantines; the transitory nature of empires helped to deflate the Turks. Where was Darius now, where Alexander, where Caesar? Where were Babylon and Antioch? Where the Medians and the Parthians? The Turks should not gloat too much. Their turn would come yet. This was the system adopted by Joseph Bryennius in his "Discussion with the Infidel."⁸⁰ But it was difficult to hold two mutually exclusive views at the same time. It was impossible to assume that the end of the world would come for the Byzantines alone,⁸¹ and one wondered how the Turks would have time to decline, if the general conflagration was around the corner.

Thus at the eleventh hour, even Scholarius dissociated the end of the world from the end of the Empire, when he predicted the fall of the City: "Near is the end . . . of this world, as can be deduced from the present state of affairs. And if not of the whole world, at least it must be said that *our nation* is at its last gasp, unless God should extend to us his protecting hand."⁸²

After the fall, it was almost easier to believe in the cyclical theory than to continue to set up deadlines for the end of the world or to compute dates for the Empire's miraculous rebirth.⁸³ Michael Apostolis grudgingly used the relativistic doctrine in comparing the ascending Italian culture with the old Hellenic one.⁸⁴ The pro-Turkish historian Critobulus invoked it to alleviate his compatriots'

⁷⁸ Metochites, *Miscellanea*, § 110, pp. 725–726; § 112, pp. 751; 752; 756–757. Compare the dance simile on p. 726 with Philo, *Quod deus sit immutabilis*, § 176. Metochites had read Philo: cf. *Miscellanea*, § 16, p. 116 ff.

⁷⁹ Cf. my *Makrembolites*, p. 213, lines 16–18.

⁸⁰ Bryennius, *Διάλεξις*, fol. 149^r: Christian defeats occur τῷ τὴν συντέλειαν ἐγγίζειν. But on fol. 149^v we read a dirge for *les neiges d'antan*: καὶ ἦδε φυλὴ ἡ κατὰ τὸ πλῆθος ἐγκαυχομένη ἠφάνισται, οὕτω καὶ ὁ μέγιστος βασιλεὺς . . . καὶ ἡ πολυάνθρωπος πόλις, καὶ τὸ ἄπειρον ἔθνος, κὰν δοκῆ μονιμοτέρως ἐπιπολάζειν τῷ βίῳ· ἄλλ' οὖν τέλος ὑφίσταται τέως, ἡ ἀπεκδέχεται . . . εἰ δὲ μή, ποῦ Κύρος, ποῦ Δάρειος, ποῦ Ἀλέξανδρος, ποῦ Καίσαρ . . . ποῦ Νινευί . . . Βαβυλών, Ἀντιόχεια . . . ποῦ Μασαγέται καὶ Μῆδοι . . . ὥστε μὴ καυχάσθω τις ἐν πλήθει γένους, καὶ τυράννων ἰσχύει, καὶ πόλεων μεγέθει, τῶν νῦν ὄντων καὶ μετ' ὀλίγον οὐκ ἐσομένων.

⁸¹ The difficulty must have dawned upon Bryennius, for he made the Infidel ask [*Διάλεξις*, fol. 149]: καὶ πῶς εἰς μὲν τᾶλλα τῶν γενῶν οὐκέτι συντέλεια, εἰς δὲ τὸ τῶν Ῥωμαίων γένος καὶ μόνον;

⁸² Scholarius, *Oeuvres*, III, p. 94, lines 27–30.

⁸³ Scholarius, *Oeuvres*, IV, pp. 511, line 29–512, line 3 (end of the world in 21 or 41 years after 1472); Ducas, *Hist.*, XXXIII, 8 = pp. 285, line 28–287, line 12 ed. Grecu (Mehmed II's successor will rule for four years; then the tyranny will come to an end); XXXVIII, 8 = p. 339, lines 8–10 (in Ducas' opinion, Mehmed II will be the last tyrant of his house); XLII, 14 = pp. 400, line 22–401, line 20 (end of Othman's dynasty soon after the end of the Palaeologi).

⁸⁴ Ed. B. Laourdas, Ἑπετηρίς Ἑταιρείας Βυζαντινῶν Σπουδῶν, 19 (1949), p. 243, lines 26–28; free translation of the passage by D. J. Geanakoplos in *Greek and Byzantine Studies*, I, 2 (1958), pp. 160–161.

—and perhaps his own—sense of guilt. Since all empires were transitory, it followed that the Byzantines could no more be blamed for suffering defeat in 1453 than for submitting to natural laws.⁸⁵

The senility of a state, the lateness of the hour, the transience of empires—all these were circumlocutions which did not answer the question concerning the death of the Byzantines' own society. Our generation can appreciate how difficult it is to face such a question squarely. The clearest among the Byzantine minds did face it and their political prognostications deserve our respect.

The philosophically inclined among the prognosticators extrapolated from past events and were led to the conclusion that the end of Byzantium was imminent. But, being intellectuals, they hesitated to take the final step. Most of what remained of Byzantine possessions in Asia Minor was overrun by the Turks under Metochites' own eyes. This collapse was bad enough. But the worst was yet to come, as could be plainly seen by any person of intelligence, able to make deductions from past occurrences. When Metochites himself reflected upon the general situation, all hope abandoned him. He yearned for death to take him away before he saw what would inevitably be witnessed by those who would live a little longer. We may excuse him for the stilted phrases in which he couched this thought. We know that he meant the demise of Byzantium. But—and this was a halt before the brink—he consoled himself by saying that the future was full of surprises. Reality might yet turn out to be better than his conjectures.⁸⁶

The practical men among the prognosticators, like Cantacuzenus' supporters in 1341, weighed the consequences of their political decisions and soberly discussed the possibility of the total dismemberment of the Empire by the Bulgarians and the Serbs.⁸⁷

The advocates of internal reforms made the adoption of the measures they proposed the sole condition of survival; they realized that the Turk aimed at the total annihilation of the Empire, insisted that the extent of the danger be made widely known and warned that the time for delay was over.⁸⁸ If you do not act now, an anonymous author of the mid-fourteenth century lectured some procrastinating officials, everything will collapse and you will be left with nothing to deliberate about.⁸⁹ If we Byzantines remain as we are now, said Pletho, nothing will save us, neither the Union with the Latins nor with anyone else.⁹⁰ Bessarion, too, urged that his reforms be adopted if the Byzantines were to escape final ruin.⁹¹

Finally, some prognosticators sensed the future so acutely—or were so eager

⁸⁵ *Hist.*, I, 3, § 4–§ 6, ed. K. Müller, *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, V (1873), p. 55. English translation by Ch. T. Riggs, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror . . .* (1954), pp. 11–12.

⁸⁶ Metochites, *Miscellanea*, § 37, pp. 231–232; § 38, pp. 242–243.

⁸⁷ Cantac., *Hist.*, II, p. 154, lines 3–19; cf. p. 156, line 8, Bonn.

⁸⁸ Pletho, *Memoir for Despot Theodore*, ed. Lampros, ΠΠ, IV (1930), pp. 115, lines 3–5; 116, lines 16–18; 131, lines 5–6; 135, lines 19–20.

⁸⁹ Cf. my edition in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 14 (1960), p. 198, lines 69–71.

⁹⁰ Πρὸς τὸ ὑπὲρ τοῦ λατινικοῦ δόγματος βιβλίον, Migne, PG, 160, cols. 979–980 (the reference is to treating religious matters as matters of principle).

⁹¹ *Letter to Despot Constantine*, ed. Lampros, ΠΠ, IV (1930), p. 38, line 23.

to prod the Latins into action—that they cried wolf. In 1364 Cydones warned Simon Atumanus, a Greek prelate of Catholic faith then in the West, that the City would fall if no western relief action was undertaken within a year. The facts spoke for themselves. After the fall of the City the Golden Horde and the whole of Asia Minor would be subdued by the Ottomans, and all these masses would move against Europe. If the Latins did not want to fight at Constantinople now, soon they would have to set up their lines of defense in Italy and on the Rhine.⁹² The year 1365 came and the City did not fall. Cydones had to eat his words, but we know that in the long run his apprehensions were justified.

Scholarius was better as a prophet of doom. But in 1452 one did not have to be an intellectual in order to foresee the future. The coming end of the City was a topic of anxious conversations among simple Christians all over the Levant.⁹³

Three years ago Paul Lemerle applied the notion of decadence to the Byzantine Empire. He concluded that Byzantium was aware of the mortal danger to which it was exposed but that the Byzantine collective consciousness was not aware of a decadence.⁹⁴ For this, I should like to substitute the following formulation: During the last century and a half of the Empire's existence, Byzantine intellectuals displayed certain constant attitudes under the influence of tradition and certain varying attitudes under the impact of the worsening reality. More often than not, these opposing attitudes are attested in the writings of the same author. We may therefore speak of two techniques used by Byzantine intellectuals. The one, which remained predominant, was to cling to concepts and devices elaborated in the past. Although this technique enjoyed a great deal of autonomy with respect to reality, it was sometimes very useful; it may be argued that the skillful application of the Byzantine imperial idea prolonged the life of the Empire. The other technique, less systematically applied, was to assess the decline of the Empire and to react to it. Like their colleagues of all epochs, intellectuals of late Byzantium were best at criticizing, warning, and predicting; less good at detecting the cause of events and at offering constructive proposals. But they were not blind.

⁹² Cydones, *Letter* 93, ed. R. J. Loenertz, *Demetrius Cydonès, Correspondance . . .*, p. 127, line 85 ff.

⁹³ Ducas, *Hist.*, XXXIV, 5 = p. 297, lines 6–13, ed. Grecu (on the occasion of the construction of Rumeli Hissarı by Mehmed II).

⁹⁴ "La notion de décadence à propos de l'Empire byzantin," *Classicisme et déclin culturel dans l'histoire de l'Islam* (Symposium de Bordeaux) (1957), p. 271.