

THE EMPIRE CHALLENGED: TRADITION, TRANSFORMATION AND ADAPTATION IN LATE BYZANTINE POLITICS AND SOCIETY

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The discourse of decline has until recently permeated much of the modern scholarship on the late Byzantine empire. The only notable exception to the dismal picture that we possess of the Palaiologan period concerns developments in the artistic and cultural domain, where it has long been recognized that a flourishing and revival occurred. Yet the latter phenomenon, which is commonly regarded as a paradoxical trait of the late Byzantine empire, has done little to alter the overall conception of the period as a mere prelude to 1453, consisting of a combination of events that anticipated the eventual fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans. There can, of course, be no question that the period under consideration was marked by political decline and military defeat, made worse by economic and financial problems, as well as social and religious conflicts. However, against this general background, it is instructive to shift our perspective to the particular ways in which the Byzantines adapted themselves to the adverse circumstances and developed strategies, some of them quite novel, for dealing with the challenges and threats they faced in the course of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. Such an approach allows us to perceive in a favorable light certain developments or aspects which the traditional discourse of decline has tended to obscure or to misrepresent. Indeed, during the last few decades, historians of the Palaiologan period have shown an increased tendency to focus on the elements of vitality that are evident outside the cultural, intellectual and artistic spheres. The result is now a more balanced, more complex and variegated picture of the late Byzantine empire, reflecting its many contradictions and ambivalences.

Yet, despite these initial remarks, one may still wonder whether it is relevant to talk about “Byzantium displayed as empire” – the main theme of our session – in reference to the Palaiologan period, given the fact that from the mid-fourteenth century onwards Byzantium, confined almost to the walls of Constantinople and deprived of central authority, was an “empire” only in name. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the Palaiologan emperors, ruling over an ever dwindling territory and enjoying neither the prestige nor the authority of their predecessors, maintained to a large extent the traditional imperial ideology with its claims to universal power. Hence, selected literary and visual evidence for the image which the Palaiologoi tried to project, to their own subjects and to foreigners, about themselves and about their state will be discussed in the context of contemporary historical developments, in order, first, to demonstrate the striking contrast between ideology and reality, and, secondly and more importantly, to draw attention to the more subtle transformations or adaptations underlying the superficial display of traditional universalist claims. Based on these observations, conclusions will be drawn about the different ways in which the imperial idea and the position of the emperor, both within and outside the empire, evolved, were re-interpreted and given new meaning in the course of the Palaiologan period.

A related topic that will be discussed concerns the interactions of the late Byzantine empire with contemporary Christian and Muslim powers. This discussion is intended to focus not on the relations between states, but rather on the responses of individuals or groups from different segments of Byzantine society to the inability of their rulers to provide stability and security particularly against the growing pressure of the Latins and the Ottomans. The aim will be to demonstrate how the late Byzantine empire, despite the westward looking orientation of the majority of its ruling elite, was gradually drawn into an Ottoman system. The paper will end with some comments on the surviving elements of the Roman/Byzantine imperial tradition among the Ottomans.