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“In the Reign of the Emperor of Rome...”: Donor Inscriptions and Political Ideology in the Time of Michael VIII Paleologos

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It is common knowledge that a host of dedicatory inscriptions and donor portraits begin to be found in church from the thirteenth century on, something which has been justifiably associated with the socio-economic reforms, as well as the political situation at the time, i.e. the break-up of the Byzantine Empire, the creation of new regional states and the weakening of central government1. The inscriptions often mention the ruling Byzantine emperor as an indication of date, a practice which may acquire special significance in this political context. These references have usually been approached through the wider socio-historic context of the late Byzantine period and interpreted as an expression of political allegiance and other ties which bound the patrons to the central authority2. On the other hand, the mention of the Palaiologan emperors in the corresponding examples in Venetian Crete, was interpreted as a reflection of a fundamental part of the identity of the local Orthodox and Greek-speaking population, i.e. their status as subjects of the Roman Empire, an identity which remained unchanged during the first period of Venetian rule mainly because the infrastructure of the Byzantine cultural tradition remained intact3. Over and above the wider repercussions, any inscription constitutes primarily a message from the donors, a means of communicating their opinions and expectations, which is directly connected with their ideology and social status as well as with the time and place in which they live4. Focusing, for example, on Crete, it does not appear to be accidental that of the twelve relevant inscriptions five mention Andronikos II, an emperor who made the restoration of Orthodoxy a basic plank of his policy after all the commotion caused by the Union of the churches5. Even less likely to be a matter of chance is the fact that in two cases the donors are priests and monks, who appear to be related to one another, and who are at pains to stress this aspect of Andronikos’s policy, calling him: “Orthodox and Christ-loving Emperor”6.

1 S. Kalopissi-Verti, Dedicatory Inscriptions and Donor Portraits in Thirteenth-Century Churches of Greece (VeröffTIB, 5), Vienna 1992, 45-6 with earlier bibliography.
2 Ibid, 25. Cf. T. Papamastorakis, Ο διάκοσμος τον τρούλου των ναών της παλαιολογικής περιόδου στη βολενική Χιοράνη και την Κύπρο, Athens 2001, 298-9, where the mention of a Byzantine emperor is seen as an acceptance of his policies by the patrons.
6 These are the inscriptions in Hagios Pavlos at Hagios Ioannes in Pigmiotissa (1303/4) and another, now lost, inscription from Gortyna (1297), see G. Gerola, Monumenti veneti dell’isola di Creta, vol. IV, Venice 1932, 538, 560-1. The inscription in Hagios Pavlos names the patrons as the priest Petros and his sister Katalyge while the Gortyna inscription
In other words, the references to the Byzantine emperor could represent the expression of a political point of view on the part of the donor which could be decoded by examining his or her profile, the contemporary history of the region as well as the practical politics or even the ideology of the respective emperors. An analysis of these three parameters will allow us to determine more exactly in each case the significance of these references.

This paper attempts to test the accuracy of this view by taking just such an approach to two donor inscriptions in Hagioi Theodoroi at Kafiona in Mani and Hagios Georgios at Dourianika on Kythera, both of which mention the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos, are situated in the south of Greece and are dated to a period of general political instability caused by the stand-off between Frankish and Byzantine forces over control of the region.

These two examples have been chosen not just because of the inscription from the Mani was first made known to the academic community by the late Prof. Nikolaos Drandakis, to whose memory this book is dedicated.

The Inscription from Hagioi Theodoroi, Kafiona, Mani

According to the dedicatory inscription, the decoration of the church of Hagioi Theodoroi in Kafiona, Mani was funded by the bishop of Veligoste Georgios and a synkellos, whose name is missing, during the reign:

refers to the monk Manos (?) and his brother, the monk Panterios, and his sister Katayfaga. A nun named Katayfaga is also mentioned among the donors in Hagios Georgios in the village of Hagia Triada in the same region, Gerola, op.cit., 536-7. Given the rarity of the name Katayfaga, as well as the chronological and geographical proximity of the monuments it seems likely that all three inscriptions refer to the same person (see Gerola, op.cit., 538).

1 Cf. a similar approach to the portraits of Stefan Doukas in churches belonging to the Serbian nobility suggested by T. Papamastorakis, “Εικονογραφία της πολιτικής ιδεολογίας του Στέφανου Dusan σε καταφυγικό σύμμετρο της Πελοποννήσου”, in Byzantium and Serbia in the 14th Century, Athens 1996, 140-57.


3 On the sevastokrator Constantine Palaiologos, see PLP 1/9, 1989, 98 no. 21498.


8 On the sevastokrator Constantine Palaiologos, see PLP 1/9, 1989, 98 no. 21498.


11 “… ad Savastocratoram, fratrem domini Imperatoris, qui erat ibi de Morea dominus pro ipso domino Imperatore...”, G. L. Fr. Tufel, G. M. Thomas, Urkunden zur älteren Handels- und Staatsgeschichte der Republik Venedig, III, Vienna 1857 (reprinted Amsterdam 1964), 255. On the dating, see Zakythinos, op.cit., 43. We do not know how much longer he remained in the Peloponnese, but he died before 1275 in Constantinople having embraced the monastic life. See PLP 9, no. 21498.

out his time in the Peloponnesse add to this impression. Apart from the military operations against the Franks, he won the loyalty and cooperation of the Melingoi, the Slavs of what was already the Byzantine region of Lakonia, Michael VIII built castles, but it goes without saying that this was the work of his military commander.

16 “Ritornato il principe Guglielmo in la Morea, liberato dalla prigion e consegnati li tre castelli, Malvasia, Mista e Mine all'imperator Michael, el detto imperator commincio a molestar la Morea con gente e con Turchi, che fece venir d'Asia, e occupo molti lochi e face castelli forti sopra montagne e passi fortissimi”, Marin Sanudo Torsello, *Istoria di Romania*, Introduction, edition-translation, commenty by E. Papadopoulos, Athens 2000, 125. Sanouido mentions that the Emperor Michael VIII built castles, but it goes without saying that this was the work of his military commander.


The donor, Ioannikios who is not known from other sources, chooses to date his commission by reference to the Byzantine emperor who, given the mention of 1275, must be Michael VIII Palaiologos (1261-1282), and to a high-ranking church dignitary, Gregorios Metropolitan of Monemvasia.

It was in this same year that Kythera had returned to the jurisdiction of the Byzantine Empire. More particularly, it was by 1275 at the latest that the inhabitants of nearby Monemvasia, led by a local nobleman, the sevastos Pavlos Notaras, managed to rid the island of the Venetian Venier, who had ruled it since 1238. That the activities of Notaras should be seen in the context of Michael VIII’s policy to redeem the Southern Greek territories from the Latins is endorsed by the description he receives a few years later in a Venetian document as “homo domini imperatoris et capitanus loci Cerdigi”.

The coincidence in the date allows us to suppose that this reference to the Byzantine emperor is a reflection of contemporary political circumstances and by extension to assume that at some level it expresses the donor’s acknowledgement of the new ruler of the island and perhaps also his approval of what had happened.

However, the unknown donor was not just any islander gratified by the turn of events, but seems much more likely to have been a supporter of the policy of the emperor in question: someone who was informed about his views and his ideology.
This is implied in the expression Τώμης ἄναξ (“Emperor of Rome”), the appellation used for the emperor. The word “Rome” was synonymous in Byzantine thought with the Roman empire and its capital and had a multiplicity of interpretations over the many centuries of the empire’s existence. The name “New Rome”, the invention of which had been attributed from as early as the fourth century to Constantine the Great as an expression of his desire to create a new capital city, went on to be used to promote the city as the only legitimate successor to the universal Roman Empire, as well as to stress its precedence over the old and “decadent” capital of the West. It is not by chance that this sense of a universal, new and strong Constantinople/Rome should attain its greatest popularity in periods of “revival” of empire, such as for example the twelfth century and more especially the reign of Manuel I Komnenos. As well as connoting the Roman imperium, it could be used to denote the power of the Byzantine emperor. A typical example is the title Ρώμης ἄναξ which accompanies Michael VII Doukas (and later Nikephoros III Botaniates) in the manuscript Par. Coislin 79, in which he is depicted being crowned by Christ, together with his consort Maria of Alania. Moreover those who adopted the term βασιλεύς Ρώμης νέας most of all were the members of the Komnenian dynasty. In epigrams inscribed on funerary monuments, painted portraits or works of the minor arts, as well as in the versified panegyrics of Theodore Prodromos, we find a host of similar, and sometimes particularly original, titles combined with the name of Rome, often intermingling notions of empire and of Constantinople: e.g. ἄναξ, δεσποτής, βασιλεύς, σοτιή, Ἰλιος, ὀστήρ, and πορφυρόχρους στύλος τῆς Ρώμης. These titles, with their clear references to the Roman heritage, reflect the more general idea of “rejuvenating” in the time of the Komnenoi, as well as their at-

24 Dölger, op.cit., 93-8. It is indicative of the ideological climate of the twelfth century that a passage from Constantine Manasses Chronique Synopsis characterizes Constantinople as “unwinkled Rome, never grown old; Rome forever young and constantly rejuvenated” (Ῥώμην τὴν ἄρρυτιδωτον, τὴν μήποτε γηρώσαν, Τώμην αεί νεάζουσαν, αεί...), and another far on in the same text the comment which ends the narration of the sack of Rome in 415 and which the author addressed to Manuel Komnenos: “…and this happened in the old Rome, but ours shall flourish — may it increase, hold sway, remain young and evermore wax stronger. Yes, indeed, ο supreme ruling emperor! (Καὶ τότε μν ἰσόμετον τὴν πρεσβύτερα Τώμην, ἢ δὲ ημετέρα τέθηκα...).”
27 On these epigrams see S. Lambros, «Ο Μαρκιανός Κώδικς 525», NE 8 (1911), 145: …τὸν αὐτάνακτα Μανουήλ...; 146: …εν οἶκοιν ημοῦ; Πορφυρόχρους στύλος τῆς Ρώμης νέας… (epigram on an icon of St. Theodore, 147; :…Κομνηνοῦ τῇ γένεσις πρωτόστολοι / Ρώμης νέας ἀνάκτος Βασιλεύς, 158: «Πάππος γὰρ Ἀλέξιος, εὐσεβῆς ἄναξ, / ὥσπερ Ρώμης πρωτοστάτην ἐθνῶν μέχρι... (funerary epigram for the granddaughter of Alexis I, Eudokia), 173: Πάππος, ταῖς βασιλεῖς Ρώμης νεότητος (epigram on a portrait of John II, Manuel I and Alexios II Komnenos). See also the commentary on the above mentioned epigrams relating to imperial portraits in P. Magdalino, R. Nelson, “The Emperor in Byzantine Art of the Twelfth Century”, Byz 8 (1982), 137-40, 146-7. Such appellations in the historical poems of Theodore Prodromos are indeed legion: see for example W. Hörandner, Theodoro Prodomos. Historische Gediichte, poèmes 1, 1, 7, 114; IV, 1, 11-12; VII 8; XIII 5, 7; XXI 10 etc. In these poems the name Rome is frequently substituted for Constantinople; for the relevant references see the index in Hörandner, Prodromos, op.cit., 585. It should also be noted that in Prodromos’s verses Constantinople/Rome has a special part to play in the image of the emperor; identified with the empire itself it is his slave (δούλη) as well as his mother (μητέρα), the bearer and nurterer (ἡ τεχνήσει καὶ ἀθροίμαντη) of the Roman Emperor, see Hörandner, op.cit., 107-8. On the relationship between imperial city and emperor in the rhetorical imagery of the Komnenian emperors and the conceptual ramifications thereof, see P. Magdalino, The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143-1180, Cambridge 1993, 424-5.
28 On the notion of the emperor as light of the world and its links to Roman tradition, see Grabar, L’empereur (n. 26), 104-5. However, the appellation πορφυρόχρους στύλος τῆς Ρώμης (purple-coloured column
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Attempts to present themselves as the "restorers" of the empire, successors to the great emperors of the past and guarantors of the Roman heritage.

The exiled emperor of Nicaea John III Vatatzes seems to have had similar hopes, when he called himself κοινονὸς Ρώμης ὀπλοτέρης, in a now lost inscription referring to the rebuilding of the walls of Smyrna (1222/3), managing to stress both his imperial descent and the importance of his restoration work.

It is common knowledge that the keystone of Michael VIII's political ideology after the recapture of Constantinople was the "revival" of the Roman Empire, which involved the reconstruction of the city, military campaigns for the retaking of former imperial territories and the strengthening of imperial power through the reintroduction of earlier institutions and practices. This tendency is best reflected in the appellation of New Constantinople which was added to the official imperial title on documents, painted portraits and diplomatic gifts sent to the West.

As might be expected, at an ideological and institutional level the models for his policy of renewal, as well as the means of legitimizing his authority as successor to the Byzantine imperial tradition, were sought in relatively recent times, and especially, as Ruth Macrides has pointed out, for the most part in the Komnenian period. This can moreover be seen in his constant preoccupation with stressing his Komnenian descent, the restoration of monastic foundations connected with the Komnenian emperors in areas he repossessed and the way in which he used art to promote himself as their successor. Thus the appellation Ρώμης ὄνας in the Kythera inscription is entirely consistent with Michael VIII's inclinations to represent himself as the restorer of empire, heir of Constantinople and successor to the Komnenian dynasty.

The second person mentioned in the inscription reinforces the identity of Rome) is even more interesting, and self-evidently refers to the emperors "born in the purple". Its special interest lies in the fact that according to tradition the porphyry marble of the Porphyra (the room in which heirs to the Byzantine throne were born) came from Rome. This tradition, which, as Paul Magdalino notes, makes the Porphyra a visible monument to the political theory of translatio imperii, can be traced back to the eighth century, but became particularly popular in the time of the Komnenos and especially in relation to Manuel I. See Magdalino, Manuel I Komnenos, op.cit., 243-4, 424, 434ff.

On these tendencies in the Komnenian emperors and especially Manuel Komnenos, see C. Mango, "The Conciliar Edict of 1166", DOP 17 (1963), 320-1, 324, 330; Magdalino, Nelson, op.cit. (n. 27), 170-3; Magdalino, Manuel I Komnenos (n. 27), 115ff. 413-70 passim.

The phraseology used in the inscription is characteristic; having first stressed the former glory of the εὐστοῤῥος εὐλοετής ερίδομος Smyrna with its marble walls which time has turned into ἱσχνόπαρείω γρηί, it mentions that the κοίρανος Τώμης όπλοτέρης Ιωάννης παις Δουκο-να has scraped off the decay and set the city on its feet, H. Gregoire, Receuil des inscriptions gréco-chrétiennes d'Asie Mineure, Paris 1922, no. 81. See also A. Hrheweir, "L'histoire et la géographie de la région de Smyrne entre les deux occupations turques (1081-1317)", TM 1 (1965), 35-6.


Macrides, "From the Komnenoi to the Palaiologoi", op.cit.

Buschhausen, op.cit. (n. 32), 152-3; Papamastorakis, "Ένα εικαστικό εγκώμιο", op.cit., 236.

This is a reference to the monastery of the Mavriotissa, Kastoria and the church of the Theotokos in Apollonia. The iconographic programme of the exterior walls of the Mavriotissa was interpreted as an encomium to Michael, which extols him as the legitimate successor to the Komnenian dynasty, Papamastorakis, "Ένα εικαστικό εγκώμιο", op.cit., 221-38. The church in Apollonia was restored after the victory of Dyrrachium in 1281/2. The donor portrait in this church shows Michael VIII with the other members of the imperial family confirming the ancient privileges of the monastery which, as is revealed in the inscription which accompanies the image, had originally been instituted in a chrysoobull of Manuel I Komnenos (see Buschhausen, op.cit. (n. 32), 143-82, mainly 146-7, 156-7, figs 16-19, pls 101, 104-107).
the notion that the patron of the church in Kythera was a supporter of the first Palaiologan emperor. Gregorios, Metropolitan of Monemvasia, can be identified as the metropolitan of the same name mentioned in the second part of the *Chronicle of Monemvasia*. From this we learn that, once the Frankish occupation had come to an end, the church in Lakedaimonia was led by: “Gregory, the most holy metropolitan of Monemvasia; who is both exarch and has full ecclesiastical jurisdiction over all the Peloponnesian”37. On the basis of this reference Gregorios has been thought to be the first prelate to be given the title of metropolitan when, after the retaking of the area by the Byzantines, the see of Monemvasia was elevated to the status of a metropolis by Michael VIII38. However, given this context, the assumption of his name from the *Synodikon* of Monemvasia is somewhat problematic. In order to explain the absence from the list of church dignitaries in the town of the person who apparently had the dual honour of overseeing the return of the population to the Orthodox rite and the elevation of its church to cathedral status, the editor of this text, V. Laurent, made the plausible suggestion that this was a case of damnatio memoriae. This could be attributed to Gregorios’s alignment with Michael VIII’s post 1274 unionist policy39.


In particular, she maintains that the church of Monemvasia was already a cathedral by the mid twelfth century and that, after the Latin occupation, its status was formally reinstated by Andronikos II40. She also suggested that Gregorios was already in possession of the title of Metropolitan of Monemvasia, when he was transferred to Lakedaimonia after the restoration of the Byzantine suzerainty in the region and attributed his omission from the *Synodikon* of Monemvasia to confusion over his actual position41. However, the fact that he is referred to as Metropolitan of Monemvasia in the inscription in Kythera one year after the Council of Lyon42, alongside Michael VIII, makes Laurent’s thesis the more convincing. Moreover, something similar happened in the ecclesiastical province of Lakedaimonia where, in an attempt to eradicate all memory of unionist bishops not only were their names struck out of the *Synodikon*, but their portraits were obliterated and any inscriptions mentioning them removed from the walls of the Cathedral of Hagios Dimitrios in Mistra43. The inscription also verifies that Gregorios held the office of εξάρχου πάσης Πελοποννήσου (“exarch of all the Peloponnesian”), confirming the veracity of the *Chronicle*. This title


41 Ibid., 212-14. However, she does not explain why a Metropolitan of Monemvasia should be transferred to Sparta, when both towns were already under Byzantine rule, while continuing to keep his earlier title; cf. Kislinger, op.cit., 66 n. 571. Kalligas maintains this view in the recent Greek edition of the book, though she is well aware of the inscription from Kythera, but adds that Gregorios was contemporary with the events in Lyon and probably in favour of Union. See H. Kalligas, *Η βυζαντινή Μονεμβασία και οι πηγές της εποχής της*, Athens 2003, 280-3.


43 This campaign can be attributed to the efforts of Metropolitan Niképhoros Moschopoulos (1289-1315), M. Chatzidías, “Νέωτερα γιά...
shows that he must have been sent by the Patriarch endowed with extensive powers, probably on account of the special political circumstances and in the context of the re-establishment of the ecclesiastical administration in the area. The mention of his name in Kythera, which since the twelfth century had come under the ecclesiastical province of Corinth, reinforces this view and encourages us to assume that he played a decisive role in church affairs in the region.

To sum up, an examination of the two inscriptions in Southern Greece indicates that the mention of Michael VIII entails a topical statement on the part of the donors – and probably one easily recognized by its medieval public. Aware of the ambitions and the ideology of the first Palaiologan emperor, they are demonstrating their support for his policy and actively promoting it. Finally, it reveals how, behind the apparently formal phraseology of donor inscriptions, many layers of meaning may lie concealed. Seeking out these sub-texts and by extension studying the inscriptions as a means of communication may open up new avenues of exploration and interpretation.

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Αντικείμενο της μελέτης αποτελεί η ιστορική ανάλυση δύο κτητορικών επιγραφών που βρίσκονται σε ναούς του νότου ελλαδικού χώρου, χρονολογούνται σε μία περίοδο γενικότερης πολιτικής αναστάτωσης λόγω της αντιπαράθεσης Φράγκων και Βυζαντινών για την κυριαρχία στην περιοχή και αναφέρουν το όνομα του βυζαντινού αυτοκράτορα Μιχαήλ Η' Παλαιολόγου. Πρόκειται για τις επιγραφές στους ναούς των Αγίων Θεοδώρων στην Καφιόνα της Μάνης (1263-1270) και του Αγίου Γεωργίου στα Ντουριάνικα Κυθήρων (1275). Η συνδυαστική ανάγνωση των σύγχρονων ιστορικών συμφραζομένων των συγκεκριμένων περιοχών και της πολιτικής πρακτικής, όπως επίσης και της ιδεολογίας, του μνημονευόμενου αυτοκράτορα αποκαλύπτει πως η αναφορά του Μιχαήλ Η' δεν χρησιμοποιείται απλώς ως μια τυπική χρονολογική ένδειξη, αλλά εμπεριέχει ένα επίκαιρο -και πιθανότατα ευανάγνωστο για το μεσαιωνικό κοινό- πολιτικό μήνυμα από την πλευρά των χορηγών. Ειδικότερα η έκφραση άναξ ρώμης, με την οποία προσφέρεται ο βυζαντινός ηγεμόνας στην επιγραφή των Κυθήρων, όπως επίσης και ο τίτλος ηγεμόνεστος εν τή χώρα Πελοποννήσου, που χρησιμοποιείται για τον αδερφό του Μιχαήλ Η', τον σεβαστοκράτορα Κωνσταντίνο, στην επιγραφή της Μάνης, υποδηλώνουν πως οι δωρητές ήταν ενήμεροι για τις επιδιώξεις και την πολιτική ιδεολογία του πρώτου Παλαιολόγου αυτοκράτορα, δηλώνουν την υποστήριξή τους και προσπαθείνουν την πολιτική του στην περιοχή τους.