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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 government. 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 authority. 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 intact. 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 live. 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 churches. 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”.

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 παλαιολόγειας περιόδου στην Βαλκανική Χερσόνησο και την Κύπρο, Athens 2001, 296-9, 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 Pargia-tissa (13034) and another, now lost, inscription from Gortyna (12927), 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 Katafyge 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 Kafionia in Mani and Hagios Georgios at Dourianika on Kythera, both of which mention the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaeologus, 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 things they have in common, but also because 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, Kafionia, Mani

According to the dedicatory inscription, the decoration of the church of Hagioi Theodoroi in Kafionia, 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 Katafyge. See PLP 9, no. 21498.  
7 Cf. a similar approach to the portraits of Stefan Dušan in churches belonging to the Serbian nobility suggested by T. Papamastorakis, "Εικονοτεχνίας και γελάσματος της πολιτικής ιδεολογίας του Σένσερον Πους σε μνημεία της εποχής του και τα βυζαντινά πρότυπα τους", in Byzantium and Serbia in the 14th Century, Athens 1996, 140-57.


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


13 "... ad Savostocratoram, fratrem domini Imperatoris, qui erat ibi de Morea dominus pro ipso domino Imperatore...", G. L. Fr. Tafel, 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 and his consort, and recognize his representative, the Sevastokrator Constantine, but by also referring to him as “governing the Peloponnesse” (ήγεμονέβοντος... εν τι χώρα της Πολυπονίσου), they are accepting and promoting the imperial policy for the whole region. The title they give him constitutes an indirect announcement of his own ambitions and those of Michael VIII in respect of the retaking of the whole Peloponnesse, which, given the continuous warfare associated with the entire period of his presence in the region, would seem to have been particularly topical at that time.

The inscription from Hagios Georgios, Dourianika, Kythera

The donor inscription in Hagios Georgios in Dourianika on Kythera is inscribed in two lines between the apse proper.

15 Zakythinos, Le Despotar, I (n. 10), 34.
16 “Ritornato il principe Guglielmo in la Morea, liberato dalla prigion e consegnati li tre castelli, Malvasia, Mistà e Mine all’imperator Michiel, el detto imperator comminciò a molestar la Morea con gente e con Turchi, che fece venir d’Asia, e occupò molti lochi e face castelli forti sopra montagne e passi fortissimi”, Marin Sanudo Torsello, Istoria di Roma, 1/1-12 Add., Vienna 1995, no. 93654. According to Chatzidakis and Bitha, ibid. 134-41.
18 On the office of the donors, see Kalopissi-Verti, op.cit. (n. 1), 67.
19 M. Chatzidakis and I. Bitha, Corpus of the Byzantine Wall-Paintings of Greece. The Island of Kythera, Athens 2003, 140-1, 134 figs 1, 140-1 fig. 12-16, with earlier bibliography. On the church and its wall-paintings see ibid. 134-41.
20 See P.L.P. 1/1-12 Add., Vienna 1995, no. 93654. According to Chatzidakis and Bitha he was probably a priest, op.cit., 141.
This is implied in the expression 'Ῥώμης 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 "revel" 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 'Ῥώμης ἄναξ' which accompanies Michael VII Doukas (and later Nikephoros III Botaneiates) 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 βασιλεῖς 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, δεσπότης, βασιλεῖς, οἰκονομία, ιδρύση, κράτος, and πορφυροχρόος στύλος τῆς Ρώμης. These titles, with their clear references to the Roman heritage, reflect the more general idea of "renovation" in the time of the Komnenoi, as well as their at-
tempts 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 κοίρανος Ἰωάννης παις Δουκο­βασιλῆς. This is a reference to the monastery of the Mavriotissa, Kastoria and its feet, H. and H. Buschhausen, Die M­erkwürdigkeiten von Apollonia in Albanien, Vienna 1976, 153-4; T. Papamastorakis, "Ένα εικαστικό εγκώμιο του Μιχαήλ Παλαιολόγου: Οι εξωτερικές τοιχογραφίες στο καθολικό της μονής της Μαυριώτισσας στην Καστοριά", ΔΛΕ ΙΕ' (1989-1990) 237-8; R. Macrides, "From the Komnenoi to the Palaiologoi", op.cit., 259-60.

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 Dyrachium 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 chrysobull of Manuel I Komnenos (see Buschhausen, op.cit. (n. 32), 143-82, mainly 146-7, 156-76, figs 16-19, pls 101, 104-107).

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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 Peloponnese."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 VIII.38 However, given this context, the omission 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 policy.39

36...διὰ τήν ἁγιασματικήν ἀπηλθείσαν καὶ κόσμον ἀπεδώκοντους τόν πρότερον ἐός ὡς Ρώμη τό δεδομένον ἀποκολούθησαν λόγων ἁγιασμόν λόγιαν ἐκ βασιλέως μεγαλονοητοί..., X. Sideridis, “Μετανοια Ὀλυμπίου, Στην ιστορία της Μητρικής Εκκλησίας Ελλάδος,” *Hellenikon*, 13 (1926), 185. Another address to Michael VIII by the same author recounts how, thanks to his efforts, Constantinople had once again become the *στερρά και ἱσχυρά* place of residence. See: F. Dölger, *Le Despotat*, II (n. 14), 271-2; V. Laurent, *Les regestes des Actes du Patriarcat de Constantinople*, vol. IV, 165 no. 1361.39

37 Metà τά υποκούναμα τῶν ἐντάξεως τῶν (i.e. Lakedaimonia) ἐθνικῶν θεών καὶ τῶν ἀγίων ἡμῶν αιθέτων και βασιλέως πρῶτος καθολικῶν ἀρχηγῶν ἔθνων ὡς Πελοποννήσου... X. Kassinger, *Regionalgeschichte als Quellenproblem. Die Chronik von Monemvasia und das stilistische Demere. Ein historisch-topographische Studie*, Vienna 2001, 203 ff, for commentary on this passage see p. 66-7. On the character of the second part of this Chronicle, which is in effect a short chronicle of the church in Lakedaimonia, see P. Lemerle, "La chronique improprement dite de Monemvasia: Le contexte historique et légendaire," *REB* XXI (1963), 24-5.


39 Laurent, op.cit.


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 no. 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, *αρχαίας Μονεμβασίας* και οι πυξίς της εποχής της, Athens 2003, 280-3.


43 This campaign can be attributed to the efforts of Metropolitan Nikolaos Moschopoulos (1289-1315), M. Chatzidakis, "Νέοτερα για
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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ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΟΝΤΟΣ ΕΙΣ ΡΩΜΗΝ ΑΝΑΚΤΟΣ...
ΚΤΗΤΟΡΙΚΕΣ ΕΠΙΓΡΑΦΕΣ ΚΑΙ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗ ΙΔΕΟΛΟΓΙΑ ΤΗΝ ΕΠΟΧΗ ΤΟΥ ΜΙΧΑΗΛ Η' ΠΑΛΑΙΟΛΟΓΟΥ

Αντικείμενο της μελέτης αποτελεί η ιστορική ανάλυση δύο κτητορικών επιγραφών που βρίσκονται σε ναούς του νότιου ελλαδικού χώρου, χρονολογούνται σε μία περίοδο γενικότερης πολιτικής αναστάτωσης λόγω της αντιπαράθεσης Φράγκων και Βυζαντίων 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 Γεώργιου στα Ντουριάνικα Κυθήρων (1275).

Η συνδυαστική ανάγνωση των σύγχρονων ιστορικών συγγραφέων συμπερασμάτων 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 χρηστών. Ειδικότερα η έκφραση «Αναξ Ψώμης», με την οποία προσφωνείται ο βυζαντινός ηγεμόνας στην επιγραφή των Κυθήρων, όπως επίσης και ο τίτλος «Ηγεμόνευοντος εν τῇ χώρᾳ Πελοποννήσου», που χρησιμοποιείται για τον αδερφό του Μιχαήλ Η', τον σεβαστοκράτη 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 προπαγανδίζουν την πολιτική του στην περιοχή τους.