

The Decline of the Eastern Empire and the Fall of Constantinople: An Omen for Europe?

By Jacques Malherbe*

There is a theory, already outlined by Toynbee, that empires that have succeeded one another in a dominant position are seeing their centre of gravity shift from east to west. This theory has most recently been evoked in connection with the replacement of the European empire by the American empire, which now seems to be giving way to an Asian empire. If we want to analyse historically the mechanisms that lead an empire to its downfall, the best example to choose is undoubtedly that of the Eastern Roman Empire or Byzantine Empire in Western terminology. It is a world that has disappeared, but one that is close enough to us to allow us to understand it, and even to learn from its evolution, which only seems inevitable in retrospect. This story with its succession of internal and external causes of decline is summarized in the present study, leading to the disappearance of the Empire at the hands of the Ottoman dynasty. A parallel is drawn with the present situation of Europe.

The people of Constantinople never called their empire the Byzantine Empire. Until 1453, they considered it to be the Roman Empire. Constantinople had been built by Constantine I between 324 and 330 on the site of the former Greek colony of Byzantium.

When, after Theodosius I, the Roman Empire was definitively divided between the East, attributed to Arcadius, the emperor's eldest son, and the West, attributed to his youngest son, Honorius, the eastern part of the Empire pursued its own destiny. It successively lost Egypt, invaded by the Arabs, Spain, Italy and the African coast, despite the brief reconquests of Justinian's generals. Constantinople withstood several Arab sieges and even those by Bulgarians and Russians. The Empire that is the subject of our reflections is the one that, after the reconquests of the Macedonian dynasty at the end of the tenth century, was an immense territory straddling Europe and Asia, stretching from the Adriatic to the Euphrates and from the Danube to Armenia.¹ Reorganised into new administrative districts, the Themes, under Nicephorus I, the Empire suffered two defeats at the hands of the Seljuk Turks at Mantzikert in 1071 under Roman IV Diogenes and at Myrioképhalon in 1176 under Manuel I Comnenus. Attacked in the East, the Empire was also attacked in the West by Robert Guiscard's Normans, who had settled in Sicily. Alexis I Comnenus drove them back with the help of Venice, granting that republic the tax privileges that were to ruin the Byzantine tax system. He skilfully managed the First Crusade, recovering some of

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1. J. Malherbe, *Constantin XI, Dernier empereur des Romains* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Bruylant-Academia, L'Harmattan, 2001).

the cities conquered by the Turks, such as Nicaea, with the help of the Crusaders. The Fourth Crusade was to be the cause of a chaotic decline in the Empire. Diverted towards Constantinople on the pretext of re-establishing the pretender to the throne, Alexis IV Angelos, it led to the capture and sacking of Constantinople by the Crusaders, followed by the partition of the Empire. Baldwin of Flanders became the first Latin emperor of Constantinople and the contiguous territories. Venice took over the maritime ports of call. Greece was divided: Thessalonica to Boniface de Montferrat, Athens to Otto de la Roche and the Peloponnese to Godfrey de Villehardouin. Two national revivals were taking place at the same time. In Epirus, Michael Angelos established a despotate and in Nicaea, Theodore I Lascaris was crowned emperor. In Trebizond, two Comnenus princes established a small empire.

The Latin Empire of Constantinople was to be short-lived (1204-1261). Theodore II Lascaris had sent one of his generals, Michael Palaeologus, a member of the imperial aristocracy, against the despots of Epirus. Defeated, Palaeologus was arrested by the Emperor, while the despot Michael II of Epirus formed an alliance with Manfred, Frederick II's successor as King of Sicily, and William of Villehardouin, the Latin prince of Achaia. Elected emperor and tutor to the young John IV Lascaris, son of Theodore II, Michael Palaeologus defeated his allied enemies in the mountains of Pelagonia. William of Villehardouin was captured and the despot of Epirus fled.

In 1261, Constantinople was recaptured by chance. Alexis Strategopoulos, sent by Michael VIII on another mission, was informed by Greek farmers in the vicinity that the city was defenceless. The contingent entered without difficulty. Emperor Baldwin II of Courtenay fled on a Venetian merchant ship and took refuge with the King of Sicily, Manfred.

Michael VIII was awakened by his sister Eulogie and did not believe the news until a courier brought him the imperial insignia abandoned by Baldwin II. On 15 August, he entered the city. He then seized power and had his ward, Jean Lascaris, blinded. Excommunicated by Patriarch Arsene, he had him exiled.

To free William II of Villehardouin, he demanded the surrender of four Morean fortresses. The consent of the High Court of the Lords of Morea was required. Composed mainly of the wives of the imprisoned knights, which earned it the name "Court of Ladies", it met and provided the consent.

Manfred was defeated and killed in 1266 at the Battle of Benevento by the troops of Charles I of Anjou, Saint-Louis' brother and the new King of Sicily. Michael VIII was faced with a new adversary. In a bid to bring peace to the region, Michael VIII sent ambassadors to the Second Council of Lyon in 1274 and accepted, in theory, the primacy of the Pope and the Roman faith. This initiative was very badly received in Constantinople. Michael VIII concluded a secret treaty with Peter III, King of Aragon, husband of Constance, daughter of Manfred and pretender to the throne of Sicily. The secret was so well kept that the text of the

treaty was never found. The chronicler Ptolemy of Lucca wrote: "Quem tractatum ego vidi"

The Sicilian Vespers led to the expulsion of Charles of Anjou from Sicily, with the island falling to the Catalans. While Michael VIII fought successfully in the West, the Turks invaded his states in Asia Minor, which were more effectively defended when Nicaea was the capital of the Empire. Thus was fulfilled the prediction of a noble Greek, Theodore Tomikios, who, on learning of Michael VIII's capture of Constantinople, exclaimed: "Alas! This is the ruin of Christianity". He explained: "Michael Palaeologus is going to transfer his capital to Constantinople. Our young nobles will run to the city with the Emperor and abandon the war against the Turks".

Andronic II (1282-1328)

Andronic II had his father buried at night in a monastery near the small town in Thrace where he had died, and completely renounced his unionist policy. He associated the son of his first marriage, Michael IX, with the Empire and married Yolande of Montferrat, who took the name of Irene. The Turks continued their advance into Asia Minor. The historian Ducas wrote: "They stripped the Queen of the Cities of her golden braids before cutting off her head". Andronic II then called on the Catalan Company, which had supported the Catalans in Sicily against the Angevins. Michael IX hated these mercenaries and had all their officers murdered during a meal on 7 April 1307, sparking revenge and plunder. The Catalans eventually took Athens by massacring in the marshes the French knights who were defending it.

Civil War of the Two Andronics (1321-1328)

A disagreement arose between Andronic II and his grandson, the future Andronic III, the eldest son of Michael IX. Michael IX died in 1320 and Andronic II deprived his grandson of his right to the throne.

Andronic III, who was essentially a soldier, opposed his grandfather and was supported by his friend John Cantacuzenes. Andronic III had married Joan of Savoy, who took the name Anne. Together with Cantacuzenes, he fought with some success against the dissident Greek states and the Emir Orkhan, son of Osman, founder of the Osmanli dynasty. However, Byzantine possessions in Asia Minor were reduced to a few isolated towns. At the same time, perhaps as a result of despair, the Hesychast doctrine was born in Byzantium, which claimed to achieve the vision of divine light through meditation and which the historian Gibbon saw as "the masterpiece of the religious madness of the Greeks". After

presiding over a council and refusing to take a position between the classical theologians and the Hesychasts, Andronic III died in 1341 at the age of 45. His successor was a 10-year-old child, John V, under the guardianship of a Latin empress, Anne of Savoy.

John VI Cantacuzenes (1341-1355): Second Civil War

John Cantacuzenes took action immediately against the enemies of the Empire, who were raising their heads. He met with hostility from the empress and her megadux Alexis Apocaukos. He then had himself proclaimed emperor in Thrace at Didymotichos, while respecting the titles of Empress Anne and Emperor John V. This new civil war led to catastrophic alliances. Cantacuzenes allied himself first with the Emir of Aydin, Umur Bey, and then with the Osmanli Emir, Orkhan, who himself sent troops to Thrace to lend him a hand. The Turks thus gained a foothold in Europe. Meanwhile, Cantacuzenes had entrusted the despotate of Morea to his second son, Manuel, thus inaugurating a policy of monopoly. John V revolted against John VI Cantacuzenes and succeeded, with the help of Genoese mercenaries, in reconquering Constantinople. John VI Cantacuzenus retired to a monastery, where he wrote a monumental history of his time.

John V (1355-1391)

The Turks completed their conquest of Thrace. They had already seized Gallipoli following an earthquake. John V, in despair, travelled to Hungary and tried to obtain the support of King Louis the Great, who encouraged him to convert to the Latin faith. A cousin of the Emperor, Count Amédée VI of Savoy, known as the Green Count, successfully undertook a crusade of sorts, recapturing Gallipoli and bringing back John V, who had been held prisoner in Bulgaria on his return from Hungary. In 1369, John V travelled to Rome, where he adopted the Latin faith on his own.

John V had three sons, Andronic, Manuel and Theodore. The Turks had conquered Serbia and Bulgaria. John V had to accept that he was the vassal of Orkhan's successor, Murad I. Curiously, Andronic, the Emperor's eldest son, and Saoudj, Murad's son, joined forces in a strange revolt against their respective fathers. They were defeated. Murad had his son blinded and he died. He demanded of John V that Andronic and John's own son, John, suffer the same fate. However, the operation was incomplete. John V then associated his youngest son Manuel, who was to become Manuel II, with the empire. Andronic, the future Andronic IV, was imprisoned but escaped and sought the support of the Turks, succeeded in entering Constantinople and imprisoned the imperial couple as well as Manuel and Theodore. Following obscure negotiations

controlled by the Turks, the throne was divided between John V, with Andronic IV as his heir, and John VII, his son, and Manuel II, while Theodore became despot of Morea.

In 1389, Prince Lazarus of Serbia attacked the Ottomans in the Kosovo plain, at the Field of Blackbirds. A Serbian nobleman assassinated Murad I in his camp. Bajazet I, who was to be nicknamed Ilderim, the Thunderbolt, succeeded him on the battlefield and defeated the Serbs. Etienne Lazarevic, Lazare's successor, became a tributary of the Turks and took part in all their campaigns from then on.

Manuel II (1391-1425)

Manuel II and his cousin John VII, now vassals of the Turks, were forced to take part in Bajazet I's campaigns in Asia Minor. As a learned man, Manuel would pass through towns that had once been Byzantine, asking about their names, to which the Turks would reply: "We have destroyed these places and time has destroyed their names". During a stopover in Ancyre, Manuel II found time for a theological controversy with a Muslim scholar. This "Dialogue with a Persian" was the subject of a much later misunderstood allusion by Pope Benedict XVI.

Outraged by the situation, the Grand Prince of Moscow, Basil I, wrote to the Patriarch of Constantinople, arguing that if there was still a church, there was no longer an emperor. The patriarch reproached him: "The church is not conceivable without the emperor".

Bajazet I summoned all his Greek and Slav vassals to Serres in 1394. He reportedly decided to have Manuel and his brother Theodore executed, but they managed to escape.

Manuel had married H el ene, daughter of the Serbian Prince Constantin Dejanovic or Dragas.

Nicopolis Crusades

Sigismund of Luxembourg, King of Hungary, feeling threatened by the Turkish occupation of Bulgaria, led an expedition reinforced by John the Fearless, son of the Duke of Burgundy, and the Vlachs of Mircea the Elder. They met the Turkish army at Nicopolis on 8 September 1396. Sigismund wanted to send the Hungarian infantry into battle first, but they were overtaken by the French cavalry led by Marshal Boucicaut, who was accompanying John the Fearless. The Crusaders were massacred or captured. Jean Sans Peur and Boucicaut were fortunate enough to be redeemed by a Franco-Burgundian embassy led by Jean de Ch ateaufort.

Manuel II's Journey to the West

Solicited by an embassy from the Emperor, Charles VI, King of France, sent a flotilla commanded by Marshal Boucicaut against Bajazet's Turkish fleet which was besieging Constantinople. The city was cleared. Manuel II and John VII, whose son Andronic V had died, were reconciled and Manuel II allowed himself to be persuaded to set sail for France on Boucicaut's fleet. On his way, he left his wife and children in the care of his brother Theodore in Morea. He received a brilliant welcome in Charenton by a cavalcade of 2,000 Parisians and made his entry mounted on a white horse. Although he spoke only Greek, he befriended one of the King's uncles, the Duc de Berry. Manuel II and his retinue are depicted in the illuminations of the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, by the Limbourg brothers. Manuel then travelled to England, where Henry IV of Lancaster had just usurped the throne and merely presented the emperor with a substantial gift of money instead of military support. Manuel established contacts with other Western sovereigns, but without any concrete results.

An unexpected event was to temporarily alter the course of history.

Turkish Defeat at Ancyre (1402) and Turkish Civil War

Underestimating the power of Tamerlane's Mongols, Bajazet attacked his allies, the Turkish princes of Anatolia. He then led his army against the Tartars, placing himself in the middle of the European forces, made up mainly of heavily armoured Serbs and the Asian forces. He was defeated and died in captivity.

Civil war then broke out between Bajazet's sons, who killed each other. The Greeks played the Mohammed card. The latter won and killed his last surviving brother. As the historian Ducas writes, Manuel was transported from a rough and stormy sea to a calm and peaceful port. Mohammed restored to him Thessalonica and the coastal territories close to Constantinople. Manuel took the opportunity to fortify Morea by rebuilding the Hexamilion wall that protected it from mainland Greece. He pursued a policy of Latin union with his sons. With the authorisation of Pope Martin V, who was to put an end to the Great Western Schism, the Emperor's eldest son, the future John VIII, widower of a Russian princess, married Sophie, daughter of the Marquis of Montferrat, and was crowned co-emperor. The new empress was particularly ugly. The historian Ducas, not very gallantly, wrote that she looked like Easter from behind but like Lent from the front. Theodore, who became despot of Morea under the name Theodore II, married the daughter of a Malatesta of Rimini. Manuel II's other son, Andronic, became despot of Thessalonica. Manuel II and Mohammed I shared a curious friendship. They met again when Mohammed crossed the Bosphorus and died shortly afterwards, leaving Murad II as his heir. Some members of the Court, including John VIII, wanted to oppose Murad with a pretender they had kept in

reserve, the false Mustapha. Manuel II, tired, said to his son: "Do as you wish. I am old and ill, my son, and close to death; I have ceded sovereignty and its prerogatives to you". Murad easily defeated the pretender and laid siege to Constantinople on 8 June 1422, without success. He sent Turakhan Bey to ravage the Morea and destroy Hexamilion.

John VIII

In turn, John VIII, having lost all hope of making peace with the Turks, wanted to move closer to the West. He left for Venice and tried to make peace between the Duke of Milan, Philip Mary Visconti, and the King of Hungary, Sigismund. Meanwhile, Manuel II and his young son Constantine concluded a shaky agreement with the Turks. Manuel II died in 1425, having, according to tradition, first retired to a monastery. In the meantime, John VIII had separated from his ill-matched wife and married the beautiful Mary Comnenus, daughter of the Emperor of Trebizond. John VIII put his brother Constantine in charge of the despotate of Morea, while his other brother, Andronic, weak and ill, had to leave Thessalonica to Venice to defend it against the Turks. Constantine shared the despotate with his brothers Theodore and Thomas, enjoying a happy period that was exemplified by the strange philosophy of Pletho, a sort of revival of ancient ideas. Pope Martin V Colonna had urged the Emperor to come to Italy: "The Roman Church is the mother and the Eastern Church the daughter; the daughter should come to her mother". The Greeks, for their part, asked for assurances that Constantinople would be defended during the absence of its leaders.

Martin V died in 1431 and his successor, Eugene IV, encountered difficulties at the Council of Basel, thereby delaying the talks. If a solution had been found earlier, Constantinople might have been saved. The Pope sent three heavy Venetian ships to Constantinople under the command of his nephew Antonio Condulmaro, with 300 archers embarked in Crete. The fleet went to Euboea to fetch Constantine and his adviser Phrantzes. Constantine was to replace John VIII during his absence. The imperial galley and the papal vessels left Constantinople on 27 November 1437. The fleet arrived opposite Venice on 4 February 1438.

In his chronicle, Phrantzes wrote: "I wish to God he hadn't been there". As far as he was concerned, one main street, the Mese, led to Saint Sophia and, if another street had been discovered, he preferred to go there by the route of his ancestors. He believed that union with the "Franks" would drive the Turks to attack.

The Emperor and the Doge of Venice solemnly entered the city on a specially decorated vessel, the Bucentaure. The Emperor and his retinue stayed in the palace of the Marquis of Ferrara. The Council opened in Ferrara on 9 April 1438. Patriarch Joseph II led the ecclesiastical delegation, which included two prominent figures: Marc Eugenikos and Bessarion. The Council then moved from

Ferrara to Florence, where local bankers were able to finance it. Slowly, the theological discussions resolved the problems that divided the two churches: the procession of the Holy Spirit, of the Father and the Son or of the Father through the Son (*filioque*); purgatory; the use of leavened or unleavened bread in the Eucharist. The decree of union was proclaimed on 6 July 1439: "Let heaven and earth rejoice (*laetentur coeli et terra*). On 19 October, the Greeks left Venice for Constantinople. Patriarch Joseph II had died in Florence. Empress Mary of Trebizond died before the return of her husband, John VIII. The delegation was poorly received in Constantinople. Some members sadly admitted: "We have sold our faith, we have exchanged piety for impiety". Marc Eugenikos refused to join. After his death, his position was defended by George Scholarios. In the meantime, the Pope created (named? Cardinals Isidore, the Metropolitan of Kiev, and Bessarion, who settled in Rome.

After his brother's return, Constantine returned to Morea, where he had the Hexamilion rebuilt for the last time. True to his word, the Pope launched the last crusade, known as the Varna Crusade. Murad II was indignant, considering that a peace treaty had been signed in Andrinople. The Hungarian army, led by Ladislav III, aged 15, the troops of John Hunyade, Voivode of Transylvania and a Wallachian contingent, without the support of the Serbs, met Murad II's army, which had hurried back from Anatolia to Varna on 10 November 1444. The crusaders were totally defeated. King Ladislav and Cardinal Cesarini, who represented the Pope, were killed.

For reasons unknown, Murad II temporarily relinquished the throne to his son, Mohammed II, who had a bad relationship with the Grand Vizier, Halil Pasha, who was in favour of the Greeks. John VIII died in 1448.

Constantine XI (1449-1453)

Pope Nicholas V, who had succeeded Eugene IV, was very unhappy. He wrote: "How many years have passed? And yet the decree of union still seems to be a dead letter for the Greeks". Murad II died on 2 February 1451. His son Mohammed II was determined to bring down Constantinople. He built a fortified castle, Rumeli Hisar, at the narrowest point of the Bosphorus, opposite the castle of Anadolu Hisar built by his predecessor Bajazet. "Whether he was walking, standing still, watching, sleeping, always anxious, he thought of Constantinople, so great was his thirst for the city". Constantine promised to bring about the union of the churches and asked the West for help. Meanwhile, George Scholarios shut himself up in his cell in the Pantocrator monastery, posting on the door: "Wretched Romans, why, by deceiving yourselves, have you strayed from the hope of God and placed your hope in the power of the Franks? Along with the city in which you must perish, you will also lose your piety".

Mohammed II arrived in Constantinople on 5 April 1453 "And when the spring of 857 (of the Hegira) came, the month of April, the zephyrs of spring had driven back the soldiers of winter; the Sultan unfurled his banners". He had an army of 50,000 to 100,000 men, and a huge cannon built by the Hungarian Orban. The Emperor closed the Golden Horn with a large chain. He was assisted by a Genoese captain, Giustiniani, and the crews of various ships in the port - in all, around 5,000 Greeks and 2,000 foreigners. The siege lasted 55 days. The Sultan had ships transported overland to the Golden Horn. The last imperial council met on 25 May. In the meantime, Lucas Notaras, the great admiral, was quoted as saying: "Rather the turban of the Turks than the Roman mitre". The city fell on 29 May 1453. The Emperor died in the battle.

An Omen for Europe

Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, the future pope Pius II, wrote after the fall of Constantinople: "Nunc Turcorum inchoatur imperium". One must ask whether it is wise to draw from past events lessons for the present times and to try, so doing, to foresee or influence the future. Winston Churchill wrote that those who neglect history expose themselves to repeating the mistakes of the past. According to the author of the *History of the English-speaking peoples*, the exercise is well worthwhile.

Following Gibbon and Rostovtseff, it has been attempted several times, based on the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 and the following "dark ages". Why not give it a try by reading in the causes and effects of the fall of the more than 1000 years of the old Eastern Empire, which lasted from 395 until 1453, lessons for the 21st century?

The decadence of the Byzantine empire was characterized by the loss of rich provinces to *a.o.* Arab and Turkish invaders, a consecutive deprivation of tax revenues, aggravated by tax concessions made to Venetian and Genoese merchants, the decline of the frontier defences resting on the "akritai", the armed settlers living in those areas, the gradual disbanding of national troops to be replaced by mercenaries and the decrease in power of the national navy.

A considerable vitality in economic, social and cultural developments could not compensate the weakness of the state.²

A strong opponent, the Turkish Ottoman Sultanate, gradually encroached upon imperial territory. The West, represented by the Pope and the feudal sovereigns of Europe, made inefficient rescue attempts and was absent in the final conflict.

2. A. Laios, "The Byzantine Empire in the fourteenth century, ch. 14," in *The New Cambridge Medieval History VI, C.1300-C-145* (ed.) Michael Jones (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 795.

If we look at Europe today, it confronts a potential adversary, Russia, backed by other powers, such as China, while the countries formerly colonized by Europe remain indifferent. The American Nato ally, on which under-militarized Europe has relied since the end of World War II, may prove less committed than in the past, especially if a mistrusted candidate, Donald Trump, emerges in the next presidential election.³

Europe has developed and fortified its economic union but remains a weak military actor. Its colonized empire did not survive the fratricidal wars of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945. Its tax resources are, fortunately, intact but a high tax burden is already imposed on its population, coupled with a high public debt.⁴ The European population is declining and a much-disputed immigration plays a vital role in its economic survival.

Tax evasion deprives European treasuries from huge resources and the liberalization of financial markets has shifted control away from governments.

Political disputes about immigration control, agricultural and trade policy and globalization generally play the same role as religious divisions between Greek and Latin orthodoxy in the Middle Ages.

As leaders of the Roman and Byzantine empires in their later days, European leaders are facing what may be a decisive moment in history. "... if we can no longer believe that history guarantees us the right outcome, neither does it guarantee us the wrong one".⁵ We are, today, looking for leaders able to select the right options and an electorate ready to follow them.

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3. E. Todd, *La défaite de l'Occident* (Paris: Gallimard, 2024).

4. P. Heather, and J. Rapley, *Why Empires Fall, Rome, America and the Future of the West* (Allen Lane, 2023), 150.

5. E. H. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (Vintage Books, 1987), 340.