

Render unto the Sultan: Power, Authority and the Greek Orthodox Church in the early Ottoman Centuries

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Readers of English who want to know more about the experience of the Greek Orthodox Church under Ottoman rule have generally reached for Steven Runciman's *The Great Church in Captivity*, first published by Cambridge University Press in 1968.⁽¹⁾ As an introductory guide to the topic, the book has stood up very well over the years but inevitably some aspects of its analysis have come under scrutiny and been found wanting. One is the assertion of Runciman (and many others) that the relations between the sultan and the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople throughout the Ottoman period were set by a seminal moment in history. Fresh from his conquest of Constantinople in May 1453, Sultan Mehmed II (1451–81) decided to regularise the position his newly acquired Orthodox Christian subjects by filling the patriarchal throne that had been vacant since 1451. He chose a monk called Gennadios for the post in January 1454 and his action has been seen as investing the patriarchate with a licence to rule over the Greek Orthodox community under the sultan's overall authority, as part of the so-called *millet* system. The understanding was considered to have lasted right through to the *tanzimat* reforms of the Ottoman government in the early 19th century.

The first chapter of Tom Papademetriou's new book summarises the flaws in this rosy picture that scholars have probed over the last 30 years. There is little contemporary evidence for the kind of systematic arrangement envisaged by Runciman and others. Rather the bare bones of the story of Gennadios' elevation, as told by the Byzantine historian Michael Kritovoulos, seem to have been fleshed out by later texts such as 17th- and 18th-century imperial *berâts* or sultanic decrees. It is unlikely, Papademetriou argues, that there was any watershed moment in relations between the sultan and the Orthodox Church. Rather they developed on an *ad hoc* basis, beginning long before the fall of Constantinople and continuing to do so long afterwards. Moreover, the Ottomans were not interested in the Orthodox Church as a species of sub-government but rather as a source of revenue, whether through tax farming or through the payment of bribes and ransoms. Chapters three, four and five substantiate this point with evidence from the Ottoman *defters* or tax registers which Papademetriou has studied in the Ottoman Archive of the Prime Minister (*Osmanlı Ba?bakanlık Ar?ivi*). On the face of it therefore, this book is therefore a useful addition to the literature in its synthesis of the ongoing debate, its own insights and arguments and in the unpublished archival material that it brings to light.

That said, when Papademetriou's analysis is subjected to closer scrutiny, serious questions arise on how valid some of his conclusions are. To demonstrate these misgivings, the rest of this review will focus on the second chapter where he examines how the relations between the Orthodox Church and the Ottomans developed before 1453. This is a purely personal choice as the present reviewer's interests lie in late Byzantine history. The chapter, entitled '*Istimâlet*, Ottoman methods of conquest and the Greek Orthodox Church', aims to show how the Ottomans' exploitation of the Church for financial advantage began in Asia Minor after it was conquered by various groups of Turks during the early 14th century, long before Mehmed II's elevation of Gennadios. Those methods were also applied in the Balkans once the Ottomans extended their power there. Papademetriou follows the 1954 article of Halil Inalcik that sees the institution of *timar* as central to Ottoman methods of conquest. Rather than displace the non-Muslim local elites in the areas that they conquered, the Ottomans would allow them to keep their lands as timars: fiefs held in return for the obligation to serve in the Ottoman army when required or to provide other service. It was all part of a broader effort at *Istimâlet* or 'accommodation' (pp. 55–6). Papademetriou then turns to consider whether this policy was ever extended by the early Ottoman sultans to the Orthodox Church and whether clergy were ever granted timars. A 1431–2 *deFTER* uses the term *Peskopos* and *Medrepolid* suggesting that some timariots were indeed higher clergy and while Papademetriou recognises that such cases were rare he nevertheless suggests that they were part of 'a deliberate policy intended to assist the conquest of largely Christian populations and territory' (p. 85). His point seems to be that this practice paved the way for the later granting *iltizams* or tax farms to Orthodox clergy (pp. 139–40).

It has to be said that there are some aspects of this chapter that do not inspire confidence. To start with, there are a number of curious errors. Following the 1951 article of George Arnakis, Papademetriou dates the earthquake which enabled the Ottomans to gain a foothold at Gallipoli to March 1355 (p. 70). Peter Charanis in *Byzantinoslavica* for 1955 showed beyond doubt that the earthquake took place in 1354 and that date has been accepted by scholars ever since. It is odd that Papademetriou should revert to a dating that was abandoned half a century ago. Similarly, we are told that the Byzantines lost to the Ottomans at the battle of Maritza in 1371. In fact, the Byzantines did not participate in the encounter: it was the Serbs whom the Ottomans defeated (p. 93).

Another aspect of the chapter that suggests that the author is really not very up-to-date with the secondary literature on late Byzantium is his account of landholding in the Balkans in the period of transition from Byzantine to Ottoman rule. While the *timar* system is lauded as an integral ingredient in the rapid expansion of Ottoman power, we are told that one symptom of Byzantium's inexorable decline was that the state was moving 'increasingly towards a feudal system of administration' (p. 68). It is strange that landholding in return for military service should be simultaneously a mark of Ottoman dynamism and Byzantine decadence. Quite apart from the inconsistency, 'feudal' is rather a dangerous word these days. Western European medievalists have tended to avoid it ever since Susan Reynolds' 1986 *Fiefs and Vassals* (2) completely undermined the old consensus that landholding throughout Europe was based on military service. Byzantinists were always rather wary of the term but a group of scholars, of whom George Ostrogorsky (1902–76) is the best known, did argue that during the 11th to 14th centuries the emperors introduced a system whereby magnates held land in return for military service, along the lines of a western fief. The Byzantine equivalent of the fief or *timar* was the grant of *Pronoia* and this is presumably what Papademetriou is referring to when speaks of a 'feudal system of administration'. What he does not seem to be aware of is that Ostrogorsky's thesis has been very comprehensively undermined over the past three decades, most particularly by Mark Bartusis in *Land and Privilege in Byzantium: The Institution of Pronoia*. (3) Bartusis shows very convincingly that the word *Pronoia* was never as closely defined as Ostrogorsky suggested and certainly did not necessarily mean landholding in return for military service. It could cover all kinds of grants of land as well as of tax immunity. Thus to say that Byzantium was adopting 'a feudal system of administration' in the 14th century is not only outdated but decidedly misleading too.

These errors and outmoded interpretations could, of course, be simply the kind of slips that we all make from time to time. As a specialist in the Ottoman period, Papademetriou cannot be expected to be conversant

with every twist and turn of the often very abstruse debates about chronology or the nature of landholding in late Byzantium. Unfortunately, there are times when the flaws go beyond mere slips to the point where Papademetriou's questionable use of evidence undermines the credibility of his arguments.

To take just one example, he argues that Byzantine monasteries evolved a pragmatic relationship with their new Ottoman masters in the late 14th and early 15th centuries which closely reflected their earlier interaction with the Christian Byzantine emperors (p. 91). The overall point is an interesting and valid one but problems arise when Papademetriou tries to back it up by focusing on the relations between the Byzantine emperor John V Palaiologos (1354–91) and the monasteries of Mount Athos during the 1370s. According to Papademetriou, the emperor 'decided to alienate half the monastic estates [of Mount Athos] and turn them into fiefs similar to timars, known to the Byzantines as *pronoia*' (p. 93). So far so good: a case is apparently being made for Ottoman policy towards the monasteries growing out of previous Byzantine practice. Doubts start to surface when one seeks the substantiation for that statement. Papademetriou cites page 119 of Peter Charanis' article 'The monastic properties and the state in the Byzantine empire' in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* for 1948.⁽⁴⁾ Confusingly there is no page 119 in that article which ends on page 118. This reader was left to deduce that reference must be to page 117 where Charanis concludes from a *prostagma* or order of 1408 issued by Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (1391–1425) that the tax immunity of the Athos monasteries had been withdrawn in the 1370s. That, however, is something very different from turning the estates into timars. Any diligent scholar would have moved beyond the secondary article and looked at the document itself. Charanis himself was unable to do so because he had no access to the 1408 document only to a summary of it given to him by a Russian scholar V. Mošin, Mošin had, however, published the text in *Srpska Kraljevska Akademija* ⁽⁵⁾, so even if this full published version was inaccessible to Charanis in 1948, it is available now. If Papademetriou is basing his assertion that the Byzantine emperor pre-empted the Ottomans in making monasteries responsible for supporting troops on this document, why does he not cite it directly? Why does he not tell us exactly where it says that John V 'decided to alienate half the monastic estates and turn them into fiefs similar to timars'?

It is not that Papademetriou is unaware of the *prostagma* of 1408. On the contrary, he specifically refers to it in order to substantiate his assertion that Byzantine monasteries in the Balkans were already paying the *haraç* tax to the Ottomans in the early 15th century (p. 98). Once again, however, it is clear that he has not accessed the text directly. This time the footnote adduces the authority of an article published by Nicolas Oikonomides in 1969.⁽⁶⁾ A glance at Oikonomides' footnotes shows that he is discussing exactly this same *prostagma* published by Mošin in 1939. Papademetriou could have used that reference to track Mošin's work down but he appears not to have done so. Instead he cites, alongside Oikonomides, *Actes de Lavra III*, no. 161 ⁽⁷⁾, thus giving the impression that the text of the 1408 *prostagma* is to be found there. It is not. The document in the Athos collection is dated 1409 and is something completely different. So once again, Papademetriou apparently fails to substantiate his point by direct citation of evidence and draws wide conclusions solely on the basis of allusions by other scholars.

One could also question his conclusions when he bases them on evidence that he evidently has accessed directly. The second chapter opens with the Ottoman capture of Gregory Palamas, archbishop of Thessalonica, in 1354. Palamas left an account of his experiences in captivity which Papademetriou has clearly read. It is the point that he bases on this text that is puzzling. He finds it significant that Palamas was not ‘treated according to a prescribed Islamic policy for Greek Orthodox bishops’ or as ‘an imperial Byzantine agent’. Instead he was held to ransom because the Ottomans ‘were not concerned with the political implications or the strategic military advantage of capturing even such a famous and important individual’ (p. 66). But ransoming high-status prisoners was standard practice throughout the medieval world, Muslim and Christian. When the king of France, John II, was captured by the English at Poitiers in 1356 a ransom was demanded for his release, even though he stood in the way of Edward III’s claim to the French crown. The Ottomans likewise routinely ransomed their high-status prisoners, like the courtier George Sphrantzes and his wife after the fall of Constantinople in 1453.⁽⁸⁾ Thus whatever Papademetriou might say, there does not seem to be any particular significance in the decision of the Ottomans to ransom Palamas.

To conclude, my aim in this review has not been to reject Tom Papademetriou’s central thesis. On the contrary, it strikes me as being a much more credible and likely construction of the relations between the Sultan and the Orthodox Church than that put forward by Steven Runciman and an earlier generation of historians. My problem is that when I look in detail at the analysis of matters of which I have some knowledge, I find deep flaws in both methodology and assertions. That immediately starts me wondering whether there are similar flaws in the material that covers the post 1500 period with which I am less familiar. It may be though that I have failed to grasp some subtle point or misunderstood in some way so perhaps the author would like to comment on these issues.

Notes

1. Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity* (Cambridge, 1968).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford, 1986).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Mark Bartusis, *Land and Privilege in Byzantium: The Institution of Pronoia* (Cambridge, 2012).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Peter Charanis, ‘The monastic properties and the state in the Byzantine Empire’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 4 (1948), 51–118.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. V. Mošin, *Srpska Kraljevska Akademija, Spomenik*, 91 (1939), 165–7.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Nicolas Oikonomides, ‘Le haradj dans l’empire byzantin du XVe siècle’, in *Actes du premier congrès international des études balkaniques et sud-est européennes*, vol. 3 (Sofia, 1969), pp. 681–8, at 684 and reprinted in Nicolas Oikonomides, *Documents et études sur les institutions de Byzance (VIIe-XVe s.)* (London, 1976), no. XIX.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. *Actes de Lavra III: de 1329 à 1500*, ed. Paul Lemerle, A. Guillou, D. Papachryssanthou and N. Svoronos, *Archives de l’Athos* 10 (Paris, 1979), no. 161, pp. 153–61.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. George Sphrantzes, *Cronaca (Chronicon Minus)*, ed. Riccardo Maisano, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae*, 29 (Rome, 1990), XXXV.11 and XXXVII.6, pp. 134–5, 144–5.[Back to \(8\)](#)

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