

CHAPTER I

THE DYING EMPIRE

On Christmas Day in the year 1400 King Henry IV of England gave a banquet in his palace of Eltham. His purpose was not only to celebrate the holy festival. He wished also to do honour to a distinguished guest. This was Manuel II Palaeologus, Emperor of the Greeks, as most Westerners called him, though some remembered that he was the true Emperor of the Romans. He had travelled through Italy and had paused at Paris, where King Charles VI of France had redecorated a wing of the Louvre to house him and where the professors at the Sorbonne had been delighted to meet a monarch who could argue with them with as much learning and subtlety as they themselves commanded. In England everyone was impressed by the dignity of his demeanour and by the spotless white robes that he and his courtiers wore. But, for all his high titles, his hosts were moved to pity for him; for he had come as a beggar, in a desperate search for help against the infidel who encompassed his empire. To the lawyer Adam of Usk, who was working at King Henry's court, it was tragic to see him there. 'I reflected', Adam wrote, 'how grievous it was that this great Christian prince should be driven by the Saracens from the furthest East to these furthest Western islands to seek aid against them. . . . O God', he added, 'what dost thou now, ancient glory of Rome?'¹

Indeed, the ancient Roman Empire had shrunk to very little. Manuel was the lawful heir of Augustus and of Constantine; but many centuries had passed since the Emperors residing at Constantinople could command the allegiance of the Roman World. To the West they had become mere lords of the Greeks, or of Byzantium, unworthy rivals of the Emperors who had sprung up

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in the West. Till the eleventh century Byzantium had been a splendid and dominant power, the champion of Christendom against the onslaught of Islam. The Byzantines had done their duty vigorously and successfully, till in the mid-eleventh century a new Moslem challenge had come from the East with the invasion of the Turks; while Western Europe had developed so far as to attempt aggression of its own, in the persons of the Normans. Byzantium was entangled in a war on two fronts at a moment when it was passing through constitutional and dynastic difficulties. The Normans were driven back, though with the loss of Byzantine Italy; but the Byzantines had to abandon for ever to the Turks the lands that had supplied most of their soldiers and most of their food, the upland plains of Anatolia. Henceforward the Empire remained caught between two fires; and this middle position was complicated by the movement that we call the Crusades. As Christians the Byzantines sympathized with the Crusaders. But their long political experience had taught them to show some tolerance towards the infidel and to accept his existence. The Holy War as practised by the Westerners seemed to them dangerous and unrealistic.

They hoped, however, that advantages might be reaped from it. But a man in the middle can only be secure if he is strong. Byzantium continued to play the part of a great power when in fact its strength was already undermined. The loss of the Anatolian recruiting grounds in a period of constant warfare forced the Emperor to depend on foreign allies and foreign mercenaries; and both demanded payment, in money and in commercial concessions. The demands came at a time when the domestic economy of the Empire was upset by the loss of the Anatolian corn-fields. Throughout the twelfth century Constantinople seemed to be so rich and splendid a city, the Imperial court so magnificent and the wharves and bazaars so full of merchandise that the Emperor was still treated as a mighty potentate. But he was given no thanks by the Moslems for trying to restrain crusading ardour,

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while the Crusaders were offended by his lukewarm attitude towards their Holy War. Meanwhile, religious differences between Eastern and Western Christendom, deep-seated in origin and exacerbated by politics during the course of the eleventh century, steadily worsened, till by the end of the twelfth century the Churches of Rome and Constantinople were undeniably in schism.

The crisis came when a crusading army, lured by the ambition of its leaders, by the jealous greed of their Venetian allies, and by the resentment that every Westerner now felt against the Byzantine Church, turned against Constantinople and captured and sacked it, setting up a Latin Empire on its ruins. This Fourth Crusade of 1204 put an end to the old East Roman Empire as a supernational state. After half a century of exile at Nicaea, in north-western Asia Minor, the Imperial authorities re-entered Constantinople; and the Latin Empire collapsed. A new era of greatness seemed to be at hand. But the empire restored by Michael Palaeologus was no longer the dominant power in the Christian East. It retained something of its old mystical prestige. Constantinople was still New Rome, the hallowed historical capital of the Orthodox Christendom. The Emperor was still, at least in Eastern eyes, the Roman Emperor. But in reality he was only one prince among others equally or more powerful. There were other Greek rulers. To the East there was the Empire of Trebizond, the empire of the Grand Comnenus, enriched by its silver-mines and by the trade that came along the age-old route from Tabriz and Further Asia. In Epirus there was the Despotate of the princes of the House of Angelus, at one time rivals of the Nicaeans in the race to recapture the capital, but soon, now, to fade into impotence. In the Balkans were Bulgaria and Serbia, each in turn to dominate the peninsula. There were Frankish lordships and Italian colonies all over the Greek mainland and islands. To oust the Venetians from Constantinople the Byzantines had called in the Genoese, who had to be rewarded; and now the Genoese colony of Pera, or Galata, just across the Golden

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Horn, had stolen most of the trade of the capital.¹ There were dangers all round. In Italy there were potentates eager to avenge the fall of the Latin Empire. Slav princes in the Balkans yearned for the Imperial title. In Asia the Turks for a while had been quiescent; indeed, without this quiescence Byzantium could hardly have survived. But they were soon now to revive under the leadership of a dynasty of brilliant chieftains, Osman and his Ottoman successors. The restored Byzantine Empire, with complicated commitments in Europe and a constant threat from the West, needed more money and men than it possessed. It economized on the eastern frontier until it was too late and the Ottoman Turks had broken through the defences.²

Disillusion set in. The fourteenth century was for Byzantium a period of political disaster. For some decades it seemed likely that the great Serbian kingdom would absorb the whole empire. The provinces were devastated by the revolt of a mercenary band, the Catalan Company. There was a long series of civil wars, begun by personal and dynastic quarrels at the Court and embittered when social and religious parties were embroiled. The Emperor John V Palaeologus, who reigned for fifty years, from 1341 to 1391, was dethroned no less than three times, once by his father-in-law, once by his son, and once by his grandson, though in the end he died on the throne.³ There were ruinous visitations of plague. The Black Death in 1347, striking at the height of the civil war, carried off at least a third of the Empire's population. The Turks took advantage of the troubles in Byzantium and the Balkans to cross into Europe and to penetrate further and further, till by the end of the century the Sultan's armies had reached the Danube, and Byzantium was entirely encircled by his dominions. All that was left of the Empire was Constantinople itself and a few towns strung along the Marmora coast of Thrace and the Black Sea coast, as far north as Mesembria, Thessalonica and its suburbs, a few small islands, and the Peloponnese, where the Despots of the Morea, cadets of the Imperial house, were enjoy-

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ing some small successes in winning land back from the Franks. Some Latin lordships and colonies survived anxiously in Greece and in the Greek islands. Florentine Dukes still ruled in Athens and Veronese princes in the Aegean Archipelago. Elsewhere the Turks had taken everything.¹

By a whim of history this period of political decline was accompanied by a cultural life more eager and more productive than had been known at any other time in Byzantine history. Artistically and intellectually the Palaeologan era was outstanding. The mosaics and frescoes of the early fourteenth century in the Church of the Chora at Constantinople show a vigour, a freshness and a beauty that make Italian work of the period look primitive and crude. Work of a similar quality was produced elsewhere in the capital and at Thessalonica.² But art of such splendour was costly to execute. Money began to run short. In 1347 it was noticed that the jewels in the diadems used for the coronation of John VI and his Empress were really made of glass.³ By the end of the century, though minor works of art were still produced, it was only in the provinces, at Mistra in the Peloponnese or on Mount Athos, that new churches were built; and they were thriftily decorated. Intellectual life, however, which was less dependent on financial backing, lasted brilliantly on. The University of Constantinople had been refounded at the end of the thirteenth century by a great minister, Theodore Metochites, a man of fine taste and learning, to whose patronage the decoration of the Chora had been due.⁴ He inspired the remarkable generation of scholars that followed. The chief intellectual figures of the fourteenth century, men like Nicephorus Gregoras the historian, Gregory Palamas the theologian, Nicholas Cabasilas the mystic, or the philosophers Demetrius Cydones and Akyndinus, all at some time studied at the University and came under the influence of Metochites. All, too, were helped and encouraged by his successor as chief minister, John Cantacuzenus, though some of them were to break with him after he usurped the Imperial crown. Each of

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these scholars was individual in his thought; their controversies were as lively as their friendships. They argued, as the Greeks had always argued for nearly two thousand years, on the rival merits of Plato and Aristotle. They argued over semantics and logic; and their arguments inevitably encroached upon theology. Orthodox tradition was nervous of philosophy. Good churchmen believed in a philosophical training. They used Platonic terms and Aristotelian methodology. But their theology was apophatic. They held that philosophy was incapable of solving divine problems, since God was essentially beyond human knowledge. Trouble arose in the middle of the fourteenth century, when certain of the philosophers, influenced by the scholasticism of the West, attacked the Church's traditional theory of mysticism; whose defenders had therefore to formulate their doctrine and to declare a belief in the uncreated Energies of God. This gave rise to a bitter controversy, dividing friends and parties. The doctrine of the Energies found its main support amongst the monks, who tended to be anti-intellectual. Its chief exponent, Palamas, whose name is often given to the doctrine, was a scholar with a powerful mind, but unsympathetic towards humanism. His allies, however, included such humanist intellectuals as John Cantacuzenus and Nicholas Cabasilas. Their victory was not, as has often been claimed, a victory for obscurantism.¹

There was one dominant question which concerned not only the theologians and philosophers but also the politicians. This was the question of union with the Roman Church. The schism was now complete; and the triumph of Palamism deepened the chasm. But to many Byzantine statesmen it seemed clear that the Empire could not survive without help from the West. If such help could only be obtained at the price of submission to the Roman Church, then the Greeks must submit. Michael Palaeologus had tried to counter western plans for the re-establishment of the Latin Empire by committing his people to union with Rome at the Council of Lyons. His action was fiercely resented

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by most Byzantines; and when the danger was over his son, Andronicus II, repudiated the union. Now, with the Turks enveloping the Empire, the situation was far more alarming. Union was needed now not to buy off a Christian enemy but to win friends against a worse and infidel enemy. There were no powers in the Orthodox East who could bring aid. The princes of the Danubian lands and of the Caucasus were too feeble and themselves in grave peril; and the Russians were too far away, with problems of their own. But would any Catholic potentate come to the rescue of a people that he regarded as schismatic? Would he not consider the Turkish advance as a just punishment for the schism? With that in mind the Emperor John V had personally submitted to the Pope in Italy in 1369. But he prudently refused to involve his subjects, though he hoped, in vain, to persuade them to follow him.¹

Neither Michael VIII nor John V was a theologian. To both the political advantages of union outweighed everything else. For theologians the problem was harder. From the earliest times Eastern and Western Christendom had been drifting apart in theology, in liturgical usage and in ecclesiastical theory and practice. They were now divided by one main theological issue, on the Procession of the Holy Ghost and the Latin addition of the word *Filioque* to the Creed. There were other lesser issues. The newly authorized doctrine of the Energies was unacceptable to the West. The Western dogma of Purgatory seemed to the East to be arrogantly cocksure. Over the liturgy the chief question was whether the bread at the Sacrament should be leavened or unleavened. To the East the Western use of unleavened bread seemed to be Judaistic and disrespectful to the Holy Spirit whom the leaven symbolized. A similar disrespect was shown by the Western refusal to admit the Epiklesis, the invocation to the Holy Spirit, without which, in Eastern eyes, the bread and wine were not fully sanctified. There were disputes over the giving of communion in both kinds to the laity and over the marriage of secular

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priests. But the most fundamental disagreement was in the ecclesiastical sphere. Did the Bishop of Rome enjoy an honorary primacy or an absolute supremacy in the Church? Byzantine tradition clung to the old belief in the charismatic equality of bishops. None of them, not even the heir of Saint Peter, had the right to impose doctrine, however great the respect that his views might command. The definition of doctrine was for an Oecumenical Council alone, when, as at Pentecost, all the bishops of the Church were represented and the Holy Spirit would descend to inspire them. The Roman addition to the Creed shocked the East not only for theological reasons but because it was a unilateral alteration to a formula sanctified by an Oecumenical Council. Nor could Eastern tradition accept the administrative and disciplinary authority of Rome, believing that such powers lay with the Pentarchy of Patriarchs, of which Rome was the senior but not the supreme member. The Byzantines felt deeply about their traditions and their liturgy; but their doctrine of Economy, which recommended that minor differences should be overlooked in the interest of the smooth running of the House of God, allowed them some elasticity. The Roman Church, however, from its very nature, could not easily make concessions.¹

The scholars in Byzantium were divided. Many of them were too loyal to their Church to contemplate union with Rome. But many others, especially among the philosophers, were ready to accept Roman supremacy so long as their own creed and usages were not utterly condemned. To them the unity of Christendom and of Christian civilization was now all-important. Some of them had been to Italy and had seen the liveliness of intellectual life there. They had seen, too, how highly nowadays Greek scholars were appreciated if they came as friends. In about 1340 Demetrius Cydones had translated the works of Thomas Aquinas into Greek. Aquinas's scholasticism attracted many Greek thinkers and showed them that Italian scholarship was not to be despised. They wished to strengthen intellectual links with Italy; and their

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desire was reciprocated. More and more of them were offered lucrative professorial chairs in the West. The idea of integrating Byzantine and Italian culture was increasingly attractive; and, so long as Greek traditions were safeguarded, need it matter if submission to Rome were involved, considering the honour paid to Rome in the past and the brilliance of Italian life as it now was displayed?¹

It was only among politicians and intellectuals that supporters of the union were to be found. The monks and the lesser clergy were its bitter opponents. Few of them were moved by the cultural argument. They were proud of their faith and their traditions. They remembered the sufferings of their forefathers at the hands of Latin hierarchs under the Latin Emperors. It was they who influenced the minds of the people, telling them that union was morally wrong and that to accept it would be to risk eternal damnation. That would be a fate far worse than any disaster that might overcome them in this transient world. Against their opposition it would be hard for any Emperor to implement any promises of union; and they were supported by the scholars and theologians whose loyalty to tradition was intellectual as well as emotional, and by politicians who wondered if in fact the West would ever be capable of rescuing Byzantium.

These passionate debates took place in an atmosphere of material decay. Despite the brilliance of its scholars Constantinople by the close of the fourteenth century was a melancholy, dying city. The population which, with that of the suburbs had numbered about a million in the twelfth century, had shrunk now to no more than a hundred thousand and was still shrinking.² The suburbs across the Bosphorus were in Turkish hands. Pera, across the Golden Horn, was a Genoese colony. Of the suburbs along the Thracian shores of the Bosphorus and the Marmora, once studded with splendid villas and rich monasteries, only a few hamlets were left, clustering round some ancient church. The city itself, within its fourteen miles of encircling walls, had even in its greatest days been

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full of parks and gardens, dividing the various quarters. But now many quarters had disappeared, and fields and orchards separated those that remained. The traveller Ibn Battuta in the mid-fourteenth century counted thirteen distinct townlets within the walls. To Gonzalez de Clavijo, in the first years of the fifteenth century, it was astounding that so huge a city should be so full of ruins; and Bertrandon de la Broquière a few years later was aghast at its emptiness. Pero Tafur in 1437 remarked on its sparse and poverty-stricken population. In many districts you would have thought that you were in the open countryside, with wild roses blooming in the hedgerows in spring and nightingales singing in the copses.

At the south-east end of the city the buildings of the old Imperial Palace were no longer habitable. The last Latin Emperor in his extremity, after selling most of the city's holy relics to Saint Louis and before pawning his son and heir to the Venetians, had stripped the lead off all the roofs and disposed of them for cash. Neither Michael Palaeologus nor any of his successors had ever had money enough to spare to restore them. Only a few of the churches were maintained within its grounds, such as the Nea Basilica of Basil I and the Church of the Mother of God at the Pharos. Nearby the Hippodrome was crumbling; the young men of the nobility used the arena as a polo-ground. Across the square the Patriarchal Palace still contained the Patriarch's offices; but he no longer ventured to reside there. Only the great cathedral of the Holy Wisdom of God, Saint Sophia, was still splendid; its upkeep was a special charge on the state revenues.

The main street that ran along the central ridge of the city, from the Charisian Gate, the Adrianople Gate of today, to the old Palace, was dotted fitfully with shops and houses and was dominated by the Cathedral of the Holy Apostles. But that huge building was in poor repair. Along the Golden Horn the villages were closer together and more populous, especially at either end, at Blachernae, by the land walls, where the Emperor now had his palace, and towards the tip of the city, under the hill of the arsenal.