



Malatras, C. (2009) 'The perception of the Roman heritage in 12th century Byzantium'

Rosetta **7.5**: 1-8.

<http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue7supp/roman-heritage-in-byzantium/>

The perception of the Roman heritage in 12th century Byzantium

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The Byzantine empire was in fact the direct continuation of the Roman Empire, at least in terms of state structure and political ideology. There was no visible break of continuity with the past when the capital of the empire was transferred to Constantinople. The Byzantines themselves never stopped calling themselves Romans till the very fall of the empire. Nevertheless, since as early as the Middle Ages, people in the West have systematically denied the *Romaness* of Byzantium. After the crowning of Charlemagne as emperor in 800, they were keen on viewing Byzantium as a Greek empire. But the Byzantines themselves felt rather angry when they were called Greeks and not Romans.

But how much did the imperial Roman past matter to the Byzantines themselves? My research will be limited mostly to the 12th century. It was a critical time for Byzantium and the Byzantine identity. It precedes the fall of Constantinople to Latins in 1204, after which the ideological reaction of the Byzantines was drastic, as this tragic fact promoted a heavy shift towards a Hellenic “nationalism”. Moreover, the 12th century is far away from the era of Constantine or Justinian and the reality of universalism. Actually, it is exactly at this time that the Byzantines are no longer in a position to ignore the West, and they realize, sometimes rather painfully, that they are just one more people among the others in the Christian world. Finally, during this period takes place the realization by Byzantine scholars of the gradual rehabilitation of cultural Hellenism. Hellenism will figure as one more mark of the Byzantine identity in the following centuries.

But first of all we should examine the ideology of the Byzantine state itself. Of course, we generally assume that the Byzantine state was promoting a sense of continuity with the ancient Roman state. Indeed, this was the case at least in earlier centuries. For example, in the mid-10th century the emperor

Constantine VII identified as a sign of decay the fact that his 'modern Romans have dropped their ancestral language (i.e. Latin) and adopted Greek'. But we are unable to find similar statements in the 12th century. Manuel I (1143-1180) himself was deeply engaged with the serious problem of the German emperor's claims of *romanitas*. Manuel worked hard diplomatically to be recognized as the sole Roman emperor in the West. But certainly this claim did not bring any affinity with the ancient Romans; he made it as the legitimate heir of Constantine and Justinian. He reinforced his claims by adopting additionally in his edicts imperial epithets that had not been used since the 7th century.¹

But if this is the situation in the state ideology, if the state did not try to promote its Latin past and went no further than the claim of direct continuity with the reign of Constantine the Great, what might we encounter in a more informal context? How did the Byzantine scholars of the 12th century think about their Roman past? There are three levels of analysis for this problem: i) The use of Roman motifs and *exempla* in their works; ii) fictitious genealogies with Latin ancestors; and iii) actual statements of continuity with the Latin past.

For the first level of analysis, we are able to observe Roman motifs only very occasionally. The only scholar in whose works we can note a rather significant number of Roman motifs and *exempla* is Nikephoros Basilakes. In just one of his speeches he mentions as *exempla* ten Roman personalities. Moreover, he refers fairly often to Byzantines by using the classicizing term *Ausones* (that is the ancient inhabitants of Italy).²

Another writer who uses a considerable number of Roman motifs in his verses is Theodoros Prodromos. He almost always calls Constantinople the New Rome, and he also uses the epithet *Ausones* often enough. But he hardly mentions any Romans, apart from Claudius in one of his early poems.³ But

¹ Magdalino, *The empire of Manuel I Komnenos*.

² Nikephoros Basilakes, 65.22.

³ Theodoros Prodromos, I.126.

this is an exception, for Prodomos' verses are full of both ancient Greek and biblical motifs and quotations to a far greater extent. He was a Hellenist in the full meaning of the word, as the rest of his works testify.

Roman motifs and exempla are used by some other Byzantine authors, but, at the most, they are lost in an otherwise profoundly Hellenic and biblical material. Moreover, this kind of *romanitas* is conspicuously absent from the treatises of many prominent authors, among whom are Eustathios of Thessalonike, Georgios Tornikes and Michael Choniates.

Even fictitious genealogies involving Roman ancestors are very rare in this period. Only three can be noted: a) Tzetzes' identification of a certain Servlias with the ancient Roman family of Servilii;⁴ b) Nikephoros Bryennios' identification of the Doukai with the clan of Constantine the Great that had come to Constantinople from the Elder Rome;⁵ and c) Nikephoros Basilakes' connection of the ancestry of the nomophylax Alexios Aristenos with Aineas.⁶

When moving to the third level of analysis, i.e. statements about continuity with the Latin past, we will find Ioannes Zonaras, perhaps the most eager supporter of the ancient Roman heritage, the only one who seems to identify himself with the ancient Romans. He structures the material of his chronicle in a manner different from his predecessors. A usual Byzantine chronicle started with the Creation and Jewish history, continued with a history of the Eastern Empires till Alexander the Great and then passed to Roman history. Zonaras devotes a far larger part to pre-Constantine history (about half of his entire work) and of that part, Roman history comprises about two thirds. He actually includes a large section on Republican Rome, whereas earlier chronographers passed directly to Caesar after the expulsion of the kingship. But Zonaras is a rather exceptional case, self-exiled for years in a monastery on an island, and rather conservative and negative towards the Komnenian

⁴ Tzetzes, *Epistles*, 18.31-32.

⁵ Nikephoros Bryennios, Prologue, 9.

⁶ Nikephoros Basilakes, 13 and 18.

regime and its basic values. He does not miss an opportunity to comment occasionally on what he considers as a tyrannical rule.⁷

So, it appears that the Byzantines did not feel themselves so close to their supposed Latin past. When we look at Kinnamos' views, one of the main exponents of Manuel's international policy, we will be able to understand what had happened. In one of his digressions about the usurpation of the title of *basileus* by the German emperor Conrad, Kinnamos actively defends the Roman heritage of the Byzantines. He laments the fact that Westerners consider Constantinople's rule different from that of Rome. But, actually he has no answer to give to that claim, leaving it virtually unanswered. What he does though, is to question the Western claim itself. He declares that the imperial rule was lost in Rome after Romulus Augustulus, and that the rule of Rome fell thereafter into barbarian hands.⁸

The Byzantines could think only in terms of imperial rule in accordance with Daniel's Succession of Kingdom. This theory, that we saw in Kinnamos, distinguishes the two Romes, and is repeated in the writings of other Byzantines. It could be used as an argument against the primacy of the see of Rome against Constantinople.⁹ As Anna Komnene says, the imperial rule has been transferred, 'to our own land and our own Imperial City' and so did the primacy of the sees: *καὶ ταῦτα προκαθημένου τῆς οἰκουμένης ἀπάσης γενομένου, ὥσπερ οὖν καὶ οἱ Λατῖνοι λέγουσί τε καὶ οἶονται· ἔστι γὰρ καὶ τοῦτο τῆς ἀλαζονείας αὐτῶν. Μεταπεπτωκότων γὰρ τῶν σκήπτρων ἐκεῖθεν ἐνθάδε εἰς τὴν ἡμεδαπὴν τε καὶ ἡμετέραν βασιλίδα πόλιν καὶ δὴ καὶ τῆς συγκλήτου καὶ ἅμα πάσης τῆς τάξεως μεταπέπτωκε καὶ ἡ τῶν θρόνων ἀρχιερατικὴ τάξις.*¹⁰

Michael Glykas goes even further. Commenting on the deposition of Romulus Augustulus in 476 by the Ostrogoth Odoacer, he writes: 'It is exactly then that the imperial rule of the Romans ended. Note that it had started with a Romulus and after the passing of 1303 years it ended again in Romulus;

⁷ Zonaras, *epitomae historiarum, libri xviii*.

⁸ Kinnamos, 218-220.

⁹ Niketas Sidès, *De controversiis ecclesiae Graecae et Latinae (recensio A)*, 1.1.2.

¹⁰ Anna Komnenè, A.XIII.4.

thereafter kings and other local barbarians held sway': τότε δὴ τότε καὶ ἡ τῶν Ῥωμαίων παύεται βασιλεία. σημείωσαι δὲ ὅτι ἀπὸ Ῥωμύλου ἤρξατο αὕτη, καὶ μετὰ αὐτὴν καὶ γ' ἔτη ἐν Ῥωμύλῳ πάλιν πέπταται, κρατούντων ἐκεῖσε μετὰ ταῦτα ῥηγῶν μεγιστάνων καὶ ὅσοι τοιοῦτοι χωράρχαι βάρβαροι.¹¹

Furthermore, Manasses, using comments similar to Glykas, writes: 'So Rome having the imperial rule for a little longer, she was deprived of it, and she fell to barbarian kings and rulers of *ethne*, on whose hands she was humiliated... Having had Romulus in the start as a legitimate emperor, she lost the imperial rule again with a Romulus, and then she was not governed by emperors anymore, as she had fallen and trampled on by barbarians. And these happened to the Elder Rome, but our own is flourishing, growing, standing'.¹²

This is the only lament in the 12th century for the fall of Elder Rome, but note Manasses' contrast with and the shift to the praise of New Rome. So, Elder Rome was rather different from New Rome, the Byzantines' own Rome 'ἡμετέραν'.

¹¹ Michael Glykas, 490.

¹² Manasses, 2483-2508: Ἡ μὲν οὖν Ῥώμη πρὸς μικρὸν ἔτι βασιλευθεῖσα

τὸ κράτος τὸ βασιλείον εἰς τέλος ἀφηρέθη
καὶ τῶν βαρβάρων τοῖς ῥήξιν εἶξε καὶ τοῖς ἐθνάρχαις
καὶ ταῖς παλάμαις δυστυχῶς τούτων ἐταπεινώθη.
ἤρξε μὲν γὰρ ὁ Μάξιμος, ὁ τότε τυραννήσας,
καὶ μετ' αὐτὸν Ἀνθέμιος, Ὀλύβριος ὁ πάνυ,
μετὰ δὲ τὸν Ὀλύβριον ἐκράτησε Μαῖωρ
καὶ μετ' αὐτὸν Γλυκέριος καὶ μετὰ τοῦτον πάλιν
Νεπρωτιανὸς Ὀρέστης τε, καὶ μετὰ τὸν Ὀρέστην
ὁ παῖς Ῥωμύλος τῆς ἀρχῆς ἡψατο τελευταῖος.
καὶ πόλις μεγαλόπολις, ἡ τῶν Ῥωμαίων πόλις,
Ῥωμύλον σχοῦσα κατ' ἀρχὰς ἔννομον βασιλέα
καὶ πάλιν περιστήσασα τὸ κράτος εἰς Ῥωμύλον
οὐκέτι τὴν κυβέρνησιν ἔσχεν ἐκ βασιλέων,
βαρβάρους δ' ὑποκύψασα καὶ χωροβατηθεῖσα
καὶ τούτοις δυστυχῆσασα δορυλήπτος γενέσθαι
ῥήγας κατεῖδεν ἄρχοντας, χωράρχας, σατραπάρχας.
καὶ στερηθεῖσα δυσκλεῶς ὑπάτων καὶ κρατόρων
καὶ δικτατόρων καὶ βουλῆς, ἀλλὰ καὶ πατρικίων,
ἐπωμαδίαν ἤνεγκε τὴν ζεύγλην τῶν βαρβάρων
καὶ πρώην χρηματίζουσα βοῦς ἀγελαῖος, ἄζυξ,
ὑπήκοος ἐγένετο δυνάσταις ἀροτρεῦσι
καὶ γῆς τοῖς ἀυλακίσμασι τρύχεσθαι κατεκρίθη.

Καὶ ταῦτα μὲν συμβέβηκε τῇ πρεσβυτέρᾳ Ῥώμῃ,
ἡ δ' ἡμετέρα τέθηλεν, αὔξει, κρατεῖ, νεάζει,
καὶ μέχρι τέλους αὔξει, ναί, βασιλεῦ παντάναξ.

Moreover, whereas the term *Romans*, as we have already explained, is mostly used for the Byzantines, in two sources of the 12th century (in John Tzetzes and in the satiric dialogue *Timarion*) we encounter a different use: the term *Romans* is instead used exclusively for the ancient Romans. They are referred to as those *Italian Romans, the descendants of Aineas (Aineiads) the Ausonians, the Latins*.¹³ These *Latin* Romans may even be called barbarians occasionally.¹⁴ Moreover, many empresses who came from the West were said in encomia to descend from 'Caesars and Augusti'.¹⁵ This did not mean anything else than that they were descended from a Western king, applying thus to the Latin West the pre-Constantinian Roman heritage. Soon, Niketas Choniates would follow the same line by calling the Crusaders that had just occupied Constantinople 'Aineiades', drawing additionally a comparison with the fall of Troy; it was then that the Aineiades finally took revenge for the fall of Troy.¹⁶

Romanitas however still mattered for much, even though it had no Latin nuance anymore. For Byzantines, *romanitas* signified their ancestry, their state tradition, which was nothing else than that very significant fact of the transfer of the capital of the Roman Empire to Byzantium by the emperor Constantine the Great. But the Byzantines did not understand this as a transfer of the capital; they conceived it as the transfer of the imperial rule, of *basileia*, to their city, to their land, thus actually creating a new state. The Byzantines believed that they were descended from the East Romans, the Romans of Constantinople. First and foremost, they considered themselves as descendants of Constantine the Great and not of Alexander the Great, David or Augustus.

The void left by the ancient Roman heritage was soon filled by the emergence of Hellenism, in the 12th century. But this Hellenism was still understood

¹³ Tzetzes, Chil. III.ο´. and IX.σoζ´.640.

¹⁴ Mannases, 1360-1362 και 1377.

¹⁵ e.g. Theodoros Prodromos, VII.5-6 (Eirenè – Bertha).

¹⁶ Niketas Choniates, 652.

mostly as a cultural and rhetorical notion. The claims of Christianity and of the Roman heritage, it appears, were not enough to differentiate the two peoples and to raise the Byzantines effectively above the Latins. The Hellenic claim stood as the barrier dividing the Byzantines from the 'barbarians'. The deconstruction of the Latin past and the emergence of Hellenism, two parallel developments, laid the basis for the emergence of a national Hellenism in the 13th century.

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