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UAW Strike, West Campus Picket, day one, UC Santa Barbara.
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The Pseudo-Sparta: An Examination of The Despotate of The Morea

Dane Beatie¹

The Roman Empire of the medieval era, known to history as the Byzantine Empire, was the last independent, Greek-speaking state before the Greek War of Independence. It is commonly posited that a proto-Hellenic national identity took root in the Late Medieval Peloponnese, also known as the Morea, during the Late Byzantine Period of 1204-1461.² After the chaos and destruction of the mid-14th century, amidst the backlash of the Second Palaiologan Civil War and the utter devastation wrought by the Black Death, Roman Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos sent his younger son, Manuel, to the Morea with the rank of Despot.³ This marks the foundation of the Despotate of the Morea. This Roman statelet would reclaim most of the Peloponnese from Latin rule and survive past the Fall of Constantinople, with the final strongholds of Roman resistance only falling in 1461. The Morea displays many historical eccentricities; the Medieval Roman Empire had been centered around Constantinople for centuries, except for the Nicaean period of 1204-1461, and typically the capital held out against determined assault while the empire's various enemies took the provinces. Mystras, the more-or-less formal capital of the Morea, was a center of art and learning comparable, if not superior, to contemporary Constantinople.⁴ The Roman Empire after the mid-14th century was almost constantly losing territory to the Ottoman Turks, with the capital of Constantinople besieged two times before its final fall and the empire's traditional "second city," Thessalonica, lost twice to the Ottomans. The traditional core of imperial territory lost its former luster and importance, and Constantinople was described as "sparsely populated and sparsely built up" following the Black Death.⁵ This narrative of defeat and decline seems to contrast with the success of the Morea at first glance, whose clear cultural influence and political and military success saw them not just hold their lands but even reclaim them from an enemy. However, the Morea is often relegated to the background of such studies.

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² N. Patrick Peritore, "The Political Thought of Gemistos Plethon: A Renaissance Byzantine Reformer," *Polity* 10, no. 2 (1977): p. 172; Stephen G. Xydis, *Medieval Origins of Modern Greek Nationalism*. Balkan Studies, 1968.

³ Derived from the Greek "δеспότης" (despotes), meaning "lord" or "master." By the Late Byzantine period it was the second-highest rank in the Byzantine court hierarchy.

⁴ Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 835-836.

⁵ Nevra Necipoglu, "The Social Topography of Late Byzantine Constantinople," *Journal of Turkish Studies* 36 (2010): p. 134.

The main reasons for the success of the Morea in its more than century of existence are its geography, leaders who successfully built up their power during times of peace, the relative weakness of its Latin neighbors, and the goals of the Ottoman Sultanate. Since the Morea's success seemingly contrasts with the failures of the rest of the empire in Thessalonica and Constantinople, the character of the Morea's economy, political life, and military situation warrant an examination to determine what allowed the Despotate to survive for longer than its counterparts in the other imperial appanages. Upon inspection of the available evidence, it becomes clear that this success was entirely relative compared to the difficulties faced by Constantinople and that throughout its history, the Morea's success was due in large part to its distance from the Ottoman heartland. While the Morea was not entirely helpless, its overall success depended on external factors beyond its control. Because of this, the Morea is sometimes viewed as a "vitalic" counterpart to Constantinople, a bastion of culture which displayed a proto-nationalistic bent, at least among its intellectual elite.⁶

Hellenic Nationalism and the Morea

The role of the Morea in the history of the development of Hellenic nationalism is, while important, somewhat overstated by modern scholars. Philosopher George Gemistos Pletho Plethon spent much of his life in the capital city of Mystras and instructed several scholars who would contribute substantially to the Italian Renaissance. Plethon gained notoriety for his eccentric religious and political views but evidently retained enough influence to have the ear of the Palaiologan dynasty and serve as one of the Roman representatives at the Council of Florence-Ferrara.⁷ Foremost among those ideas was the idea that Romans were not actually "Romans" but "Hellenes," the latest in a long, unbroken *ethnos* that traced its roots back to the days of Sparta and Classical Athens, bound together by a common language, culture, and history.⁸ Plethon was by no means the first person to begin using Classical references to "Hellenes" as a way of referring to the population of the Roman Empire, as similar references started to crop up around the time of the Fourth Crusade in 1204. Nicaean Emperor Theodore II Laskaris often used the idea of the "Hellenic" nation interchangeably with the "Romans" that he claimed to be sovereign of and argued for a somewhat modern interpretation of this national project; "In the past, 'Greeks' had been those who lived in Greece; now 'Greece' was wherever Greeks lived," scholar Anthony Kaldellis explains.⁹

However, none of these thirteenth-century writers sought to replace the empire's ethnic self-identification. They instead merely argued that the Romans of their day were descendants of the ancient Hellenes. In this respect, Plethon was much more radical and passed this on to some of his students, such as Laonikos Chalkokondyles, who argued that the Romans and Greeks had always remained separate ethnicities and that the state, which was known as the "Empire of the Romans"

⁶ Marios Philippides, *Constantine XI Dragas Palaiologos (1404-1453): The Last Emperor of Byzantium* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 121. In his notes, Philippides specifically refers to the late Apostolos Vagalopoulos as one such proponent of this view.

⁷ Peritore, "The Political Thought of Gemistos Plethon," pp. 169-170.

⁸ Peritore, "The Political Thought of Gemistos Plethon," p. 173.

⁹ Anthony Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 374.

had effectively become Greek during the foundation of Constantinople.¹⁰ Going further, Plethon identified his proposed Neoplatonist, Hellenic nation with old Sparta, whose ruins lay close to Mystras. The Morea would also be a hotbed of Greek nationalist sentiment against the Ottoman Empire. It would eventually give rise to the Greek Revolution that overthrew Ottoman rule, culminating in the first independent Hellenic state since 1461. And so Plethon, and by extension, the Morea, have taken pride of place in the story of the Greek nation, cited by scholars as one of the "prophets" of Hellenic nationalism, indeed of nationalism as a concept itself.¹¹

The idea of the Morea as a cradle of Hellenic nationalism does not seem to hold up to scrutiny. Plethon's shadow looms large over the intellectual history of the Italian and Byzantine Renaissances, and for good reason, but this presents the danger of blinding us to the limitations of his actual influence. Plethon was a radical in the Byzantine intellectual world, and his nationalist project was primarily an attempt to construct a vision of the Morea that did not accurately reflect the complexities of its population and history. The inhabitants of the Morea were a mixture of different cultures, including the native Greeks (with their regional cultural distinctions), the descendants of Slavs who had settled in the 8th century, and Albanians, whose pivotal role in the development of the Morea will be discussed further.¹² Plethon's proposal of a new Sparta centered at Mystras was never treated too seriously, and most of his suggested reforms were never carried out. The Morea remained internally fractured along the lines of heterogeneous ethnicities and local barons, all fiercely autonomous and unimpressed by Plethon's vision of a Platonic kingdom in the Peloponnese. Plethon's New Sparta remained an aspirational goal that was never fulfilled. The Morea of myth is largely a result of post hoc mythmaking from Plethon's writings and the region's eventual role in establishing Greek independence. Without a populace and elite united by a shared, utopian vision of an island for the Hellenic people, other factors must be considered in how the Morea outlasted Constantinople.

Geography

The internal geography of the Morea (Fig.1) was key to its survival, as the peninsula was divided by mountains and rivers into a series of valleys and highlands, each of which served to give the people of the Peloponnese certain advantages. The capital of the Morea, Mystras, was located in the fertile land of Laconia, a rich land of valleys and rivers that allowed for the growth of important crops such as grapes and olives, indicating an immense agricultural potential and a thriving agrarian economy in

¹⁰ Laonikos Chalkokondyles, *The Histories: Volume II*, trans. Anthony Kaldellis (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 7. It should be noted that in the same paragraph Chalkokondyles repeats the myth of the Donation of Constantine, indicating his background in the Latin Duchy of Athens.

¹¹ Niketas Siniossoglu, "Plethon and the Philosophy of Nationalism," in *Georgios Gemistos Plethon: The Byzantine and the Latin Renaissance*, ed. Jozef Matula and Paul Richard Blum (Olomouc, Czech Republic: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2014), p. 418; Peritore, pp. 190-91.

¹² Peritore, "The Political Thought of Gemistos Plethon," p. 174; Philippides, *Constantine XI Dragas Palaiologos*, p. 106.

times of peace.¹³ The fertility and rich agricultural output of the Morea stands in strong contrast with the rapidly shrinking territory of the rest of the empire; the population shrank precipitously due to conflict.¹⁴ Moreover, the traditional landowning aristocracy continued to hold significant sway and autonomy within the Moreot government. They used the wealth produced from their lands to challenge imperial authority on multiple occasions.¹⁵ When harnessed successfully, the wealth of Laconia alone represented an economic potential sufficient for building projects such as the churches in Mystra^F or the Hexamilion wall at the Isthmus of Corinth (Fig.2). Likewise, the mountains gave Moreot fortifications a deadly advantage when besieged, one that could not easily be overcome even with cannon, as shown by the failure of the Ottomans to capture the acropolis of Patras by storm in 1446, and Salmeniko Castle's lengthy resistance to siege from 1460 to 1461; both benefited from the mountainous terrain to facilitate their respective defenses.¹⁶ The Morea also had the advantage of its unique position as a peninsula, with the only land route being the Isthmus of Corinth, a thin passage that, theoretically, could be blocked by a single relatively small fortification. The fortification, the Hexamilion, was the fruit of this logic. Though the Ottomans repeatedly breached it, it forced the Ottoman army to assault the fortress before it could make any headway. It allowed the relatively small Moreot army to deploy itself against the far larger Ottoman force, at least in theory.¹⁷ The agricultural wealth of the Peloponnese and its relative defensibility were both the result of its internal geography, which gave it relative prosperity compared to Constantinople and its environs.

Just as the internal geography of the Peloponnese gave the Morea a rich array of agricultural goods and natural defenses, the geographical position of the peninsula in the Balkans gave it a key advantage. The most significant threat to Roman sovereignty was the Ottoman Empire, whose rapid expansion into the Balkans caused trepidation and confrontation from even the Christian powers farther to the west. Hungary fought many wars against the Ottomans from the 14th to 16th centuries, and even France sent troops to aid Manuel II against Bayezid's siege.¹⁸ Ottoman expansion policy placed Constantinople squarely in its sights, as demonstrated by the differing purposes and results of the incursions into their respective territories. Constantinople was under siege three times from 1394 to 1453 to varying degrees of pressure, but each blockade was intended to take

¹³ Sharon E.J. Gerstel, "Mapping the Boundaries of Church and Village," in *Viewing the Morea: Land and People in the Late Medieval Peloponnese*, ed. Sharon E. Gerstel (Washington D.C.:Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2013), pp. 354-355.

¹⁴ Alexander Kazhdan. "The Italian and Late Byzantine City," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 49 (1995): p. 12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1291705>.

¹⁵ Philippides, *Constantine XI Dragas Palaiologos*, p. 106.

¹⁶ Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*, 117, pp. 335-343

¹⁷ Mark C. Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army: Arms and Society 1204-1461* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 208. Scribd edition.

¹⁸ George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969), p. 551, p. 555; Philippides, p. 25.

Constantinople itself, with only the last succeeding.¹⁹ By contrast, the Ottomans repeatedly breached the defenses of the Morea and launched raids into the peninsula multiple times, only two of which, in 1458 and 1460, took any territory that had not already been under Ottoman rule (fig. 3). The lack of territorial acquisitions in the Morea, even when they could do so before 1458, indicates the Ottomans had no territorial interest there, a stark difference from their designs on Constantinople. This is partly due to physical distance from the Ottoman center of power at Edirne in Thrace, meaning the Despotate was on the fringes of Ottoman territory rather than close to its core. Moreover, Constantinople presented a much more enticing target. Constantinople sits on the entrance to the Black Sea, and thus on a major trade route for the Mediterranean, and its harbor at the Golden Horn was deep and well-suited for trade. Constantine I selected the ancient site of Byzantium for this exact reason, giving it a high strategic value as a capital.²⁰ So long as Constantinople remained outside Ottoman control, the ancient Roman capital was a far more enticing and feasible target for economic and political reasons. So the Ottomans saw little reason to outright annex the Morea.

Once Constantinople fell, the calculus changed; the Morea and its Despots, Thomas and Demetrios Palaiologos, were allowed to linger as Ottoman tributaries, paying a sum of 12,000 gold coins a year after Ottoman assistance in putting down a revolt in 1453.²¹ Thomas Palaiologos, in particular, was a troublesome element for both Ottoman Sultan Mehmed and his brother Demetrios. He successfully swayed Italian soldiers to come to his aid during his war upon Ottoman forces garrisoning the Morea after their 1458 campaign to collect tribute.²² The pro-Latin stance of Thomas, whose Milanese mercenaries seemed to have given him the edge over his pro-Ottoman brother, worried Mehmed because a Latinophile despot could invite Crusading armies from the west to his domain, giving such an alliance a secure base against the Ottomans in the Balkans.²³ The geographical position of the Morea, once giving the Despotate a lifeline and the Porte no reason to annex it, now threatened Ottoman dominion over southern Greece, if not the western Balkans in general. Since the Despots' bickering caused a lapse in tribute, and his partisan Demetrios had failed to maintain control of his territory, Mehmed decided there was no benefit to allowing the Palaiologan statelet the luxury of existence. Mehmed invaded the Morea in 1460, drove Thomas to Monemvasia, took Demetrios to Edirne, and quelled all resistance by 1461.²⁴ The Morea's geographic position thus was advantageous to its survival compared to Constantinople; so long as the city itself remained in Roman hands, the Despotate was able to maintain itself. But once it had fallen and Ottoman attention could be more fully turned outward, its geography became a liability to the Sultanate and, thus, a reason it had to be subjugated. The geography of the Peloponnese itself

¹⁹ Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army*, p. 202, p. 210.

²⁰ Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, p. 39.

²¹ Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*, p. 225.

²² Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*, p. 319.

²³ Jonathan Harris, *The End of Byzantium* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 240.

²⁴ George Sphrantzes, *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire*, trans. Marios Philippides (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), pp. 80-81; Chalkokondyles, p. 343.

and its position within the larger Mediterranean world was a major asset in the Morea's relative longevity and survivability, as much, if not more than its particular political organization.

Internal Politics

The Morea's political situation was complicated by an eclectic mix of local groups and dominated by nobles who had enjoyed traditional autonomy from imperial rule.²⁵ To rule the Morea was not easy; it required skilled diplomacy, capable administrative work, and a willingness to relent from military activity when necessary, especially as the territory was relatively isolated from the capital and, for the most part, forced to tend to its affairs. The Morea benefited from times of peace when the despot could consolidate power and resources. The very first Despot of the Morea, Manuel Kantakouzenos, used his reign well, as reflected by the fact that his reign lasted so long (from 1349-1380). Of the Kantakouzenoi included in John VI's power-division plan of 1349, only Manuel would pass away in the office he was given while his elder brother and his father were deposed.²⁶ Manuel's reign saw the beginnings of Albanian settlement in the region and the successful combatting of Turkish raids in conjunction with the Latin Principality of Achaia.²⁷ His eventual successor, Theodore I Palaiologos, encouraged the immigration of the Albanians even further, cultivating them into an economic and military asset that would go on to serve the Moreot Despots for the next several decades through his intelligent diplomacy.²⁸ In turn, his nephew and successor, Theodore II Palaiologos, was noted for building up the Morea with the assistance of his father, Manuel II, and is credited with helping build the Morea into the cultural powerhouse it was known as in the 15th century. Numerous scholars such as Plethon, Cardinal Bessarion, and even the Italian Cyriacus of Ancona arrived at Mystras to partake in the intellectual vibrancy of the era, centered at the Despots' Palace (figure 4).²⁹ In contrast with the mixed results of policy in the countryside, Mystras was noted as extremely wealthy, a testament to the success the Palaiologoi enjoyed in developing their center of power.³⁰

Unfortunately, the Morea was also wracked with scores of internal conflicts, which limited the capacity of its government to take any meaningful, long-term action against the Ottomans. While the Morea was a rich land with vast agricultural potential, much of this land was either controlled by large monasteries or by various autonomous landowners, none of whom took kindly to efforts to centralize imperial control or use their resources in defense of the Morea.³¹ It was these problems, among others, which caused the Neoplatonist philosopher George Gemistos Plethon to write his

²⁵ Philippides, *Constantine XI Dragas Palaiologos*, p. 106.

²⁶ Donald M. Nicol, *The Reluctant Emperor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 105-107.

²⁷ Nicol, *The Reluctant Emperor*, 106; Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army*, 207; Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 532. For reference, see map above.

²⁸ Manuel II Palaiologos, *Manuel Palaeologus Funeral Oration* (Thessalonike: Association for Byzantine Research, 1985), trans. J. Chrysostomides, pp. 118-120.

²⁹ Philippides, *Constantine XI Dragas Palaiologos*, p. 107.

³⁰ Philippides, *Constantine XI Dragas Palaiologos*, -. 107.

³¹ Peritore, "The Political Thought of Gemistos Plethon," p. 183; Philippides, *Constantine XI Dragas Palaiologos*, p. 47.

letter to both Despot Theodore II and Emperor Manuel II, as the exploitation and wealth disparity often grew bad enough that peasants would flee to the Venetian-held towns on the coast to escape their landholders.³² These tensions culminated in a rebellion in 1453 by large segments of the Albanian and Roman populations, led by Manuel Kantakouzenos,³³ which had to be put down by an Ottoman army, showing that Thomas and Demetrios were incapable of adequately addressing the problems the Morea faced.³⁴ The administration was hampered by the autonomy of its landed magnates, monasteries, and autonomous minorities, which prevented adequate reform to the Despotate to combat the Ottomans or improve the livelihood of the peasantry. Likewise, the debilitating economic inequality of Moreot social life, visible to Plethon if not the rest of the intellectual elite, was a critical factor in undermining Moreot independence, as it forced further dependence upon the Ottomans at a crucial moment and dissuaded key resistance against the Ottomans in the future.

Similarly, the Despots proved too divided to adequately lead their realm against the threats they faced. Initially, the Despotate had been ruled by one man who could direct policy as he saw fit. Over time, other sons of Manuel II were granted portions of the Morea to rule, both by assignment from Constantinople and by dowry (Fig. 5). Constantine Dragas, the future Emperor Constantine XI, received territory in the Morea in 1428. His brother Thomas received lands in 1430, which he would rule mostly uninterrupted until 1460.³⁵ Much like the creation of the Despotate itself, this represented an increasing tendency for power to be dispersed in Late Byzantine politics, with the Roman government relying upon landed family members to keep order. With the previously unified Despotate now ruled by multiple Despots, coordinated policy became harder; George Sphrantzes, a prominent official, historian, and friend to Constantine Palaiologos, blames the first failure to take Patras³⁶ on a lack of coordination between the brothers in 1428, particularly on Theodore's vacillation between remaining in power or entering a monastery. However, Sphrantzes' close relationship with Constantine makes this blame suspect.³⁷ At best, the policies of Demetrios and Thomas following the Fall of Constantinople showed a lack of coordination even when their goals were aligned, with both brothers sending diplomats to the West following nearly identical routes, making the same requests for military and financial aid of the Catholic powers.³⁸ At worst, however, the two engaged in a bloody civil war which devastated the peninsula and forced Mehmed to

³² Peritore, "The Political Thought of Gemistos Plethon," pp. 182-83; Philippides, *Constantine XI Dragas Palaiologos*, p. 106.

³³ Not to be confused with either Manuel II Palaiologos, the emperor, or Manuel Kantakouzenos, the first Despot of the Morea and the long-deceased ancestor of this Manuel.

³⁴ Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*, p. 213; Sphrantzes, *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 74.

³⁵ Sphrantzes, *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 33, pp. 45-6.

³⁶ A coastal city on the far north of the Peloponnese, and by that time the last remnant of the Latin Principality of Achaea.

³⁷ Sphrantzes, *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 33

³⁸ Harris, *The End of Byzantium*, pp. 234-5.

intervene when it appeared the pro-Western Thomas was about to win.³⁹ The internal political situation of the Morea was, therefore, fraught with division at every level; from the disparity between urban Mystras and the countryside, the rich magnates and the impoverished peasantry, and even between the Palaiologan Despots, the internal political situation of the Morea was practically defined by division. While the Morea's governance allowed for a degree of stabilization and the construction of a wealthy urban center of learning at Mystras, the divisions at the heart of Moreot politics meant that its internal political situation was more a hindrance than a help to its survival.

Diplomacy

Diplomacy served the Despotate well during its expansion into its Latin neighbors to the north. Indeed, it was the primary means by which the Despotate expanded. It was the aforementioned diplomatic prowess displayed by Theodore I in his dealings with the Albanian settlers that secured the Despotate a vital source of soldiers. Corinth, for instance, had been bought rather than conquered by Theodore I, indicating that Moreot expansionist policy at this time was at least in part dictated by negotiation and purchase rather than conquest.⁴⁰ Likewise, most of the remnants of the Achaean Principality were absorbed as dowries in a diplomatic marriage between the Palaiologoi and both the Tocco Lord of Epirus⁴¹ and the heirs to the Principality itself, with the Tocco lands passing to Constantine Palaiologos through his marriage to Tocco's niece in 1428. The rump Principality passed to Thomas Palaiologos through his marriage to Catherine Zaccaria in 1432.⁴² The most significant territorial expansions of the Despotate occurred through either purchase or marriage alliance, with offensive military campaigns taking a secondary role to negotiation and alliance (figure 6).

The greatest success of the Despotate in the field of diplomacy was in securing their recent conquest of Patras from the Ottomans. Following the surrender of the city in 1429, Ottoman ambassadors arrived to order Constantine to restore Patras, whose Catholic metropolitan paid tribute to the Sultan, to its previous owners. Constantine dispatched Sphrantzes as ambassador to the Sultan and the Turkish governor of Thessaly, Turahan Bey. As Sphrantzes relates in his chronicle, he discovered that the Turkish ambassadors he was traveling with bore letters from the metropolitan to the Sultan. Sphrantzes then was able to trick the ambassadors into intoxicating themselves, allowing him time to open, copy, and reseal the letters. Armed with the knowledge of what the letters contained, Sphrantzes could stall the Ottoman response to the conquest by requesting a Turkish envoy accompany him to relay the bad news to Constantine, which was granted. He then traveled to Turahan's court and, from there, successfully negotiated recognition of his lord's conquest.⁴³ This act of espionage and diplomacy indicates that the Despotate was able to

³⁹ Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*, p. 319.

⁴⁰ Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, p. 787.

⁴¹ Epirus is the region of Greece adjacent to the Adriatic Sea. It had been ruled by the Italian Tocco dynasty since 1416.

⁴² Sphrantzes, *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire*, pp. 33-45.

⁴³ Sphrantzes, *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire*, pp. 43-4; Philippides, *Constantine XI Dragas Palaiologos*, pp. 115-6.

successfully navigate the political scene under the gaze of the Ottoman Sultan to accomplish at least some of its goals. Careful diplomatic maneuvering allowed for a Roman reconquest (of sorts) of most of the Peloponnese and to assert its authority in the face of Ottoman opposition and domination. Careful negotiation, marriage alliances, and espionage, therefore, help explain the success of the Despotate compared to the central imperial government at Constantinople.

Unfortunately, diplomatic failures toward the Ottomans also explain both the Fall of Constantinople and the eventual fall of the Morea. Constantinople served as a source of potential political instability for the newly crowned Sultan Mehmed II; a minor member of the Ottoman dynasty had taken up residence in Constantinople as a guest and bargaining chip of the Roman emperor, and then-Emperor Constantine XI attempted to use his guest to negotiate lower tribute to the Sultan.⁴⁴ Unfortunately for Constantine, this move underestimated both the daring of the new Sultan and Ottoman ideology. For young Sultan Mehmed, the period leading up to the Siege of Constantinople was a critical time of consolidation for his regime, and the potential for a Roman-sponsored usurper to gather support among his enemies within and without his realm was plausible. Mere decades ago, a disastrous series of civil wars followed Bayezid I's fall at Ankara. External powers (including Constantine's father, Manuel II) pitted contenders to the Ottoman throne against one another. More pressingly, Mehmed was young and, worse than untested, had been forced to call his father, Murad II, out of retirement to take the throne up during the Crusade of Varna, leaving him with a stain on his reputation he was eager to erase.⁴⁵ The conquest of Constantinople would kill two birds with one stone; it would prove his credentials as a holy warrior as well as remove a potential rival, allowing him to prove himself as a worthy successor to his father.

As for ideology, while the Ottoman sultans would claim the title of *Kayser-i-Rum* (Emperor of Rome/the Romans) through their possession of Constantinople, it is notable that Tursun Beg's panegyric history of Mehmed does not mention this specific idea as a motivation for his move on Constantinople, indicating only the consolidation mentioned above and that "[i]t was intolerable that [Constantinople], surrounded by the lands of Islam, should survive under a Christian ruler," making the idea of jihad a slightly more plausible contemporary rationale for the conquest than claiming the mantle of Roman inheritance.⁴⁶ Constantine's failure to accurately gauge his negotiating position concerning the Ottomans was a fatal error that, as will be seen later in this paper, reflects his overconfidence in his prowess as a leader.

Likewise, the disorganized internal administration of the Moreot administration made diplomatic efforts following the Fall of Constantinople ineffective, even though they were arguably in a far better position than Constantinople itself had been. Mehmed's primary efforts following the Fall of Constantinople were directed against the Serbian Despotate and his rival, Regent Jan Hunyadi of Hungary, particularly against the great fortress city of Belgrade (which he failed to take in 1456).⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Tursun Beg, *The History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, trans. Halil Inalcik and Rhoads Murphey (Bibliotheca Minneapolis & Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1978), p. 33.

⁴⁵ Tursun, *The History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, p. 32.

⁴⁶ Tursun, *The History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, p. 33.

⁴⁷ Sphrantzes, *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 75; Tursun, *The History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, p. 39

Despite the rhetoric Mehmed allegedly espoused, according to Tursun Beg, he seemed reluctant to annex the Morea outright, as he had sent troops to aid the Despots in putting down the revolt of the Albanians in 1454 in exchange for tribute.⁴⁸ Indeed, a different court historian of Mehmed, a Greek named Michael Kritovoulos, lists the "Peloponnesians" as among the many peoples with whom Mehmed met and established treaties following the capture of Constantinople, indicating that Mehmed wished (or at least, his court historians wanted us to believe he wished) for decent relations with the Palaiologan Despots.⁴⁹ One of Mehmed's later conditions for peace with Demetrios in 1458 was for the latter's daughter to marry the Sultan, making the Despotate connected by marriage to the Ottoman dynasty, a strange demand if he planned to outright destroy it from the beginning.⁵⁰ Contrary to many imaginings of the Ottoman Empire as an all-conquering state, the Ottomans did, at times, rely on loyal vassals, as seen by their policy toward Wallachia, where they installed a friendly Voivode to govern the country in 1462. Combined with previous Ottoman attempts to capture the Peloponnese resulting in no actual territorial gains, this indicates Ottoman willingness to allow the Palaiologos brothers to govern as Ottoman dependents.

But the brothers' refusal to pay tribute or send any kind of embassy to Mehmed and their internal conflict made Mehmed's patience thin. Worse than Constantine's hamfisted attempt at dynastic blackmail was the brothers' complete lack of overtures to Mehmed, especially as the threat of conflict with the Italians reared its head, exacerbated by Thomas' Western sympathies and diplomatic overtures.⁵¹ As the Despots could not coordinate an effective diplomatic effort to keep the Ottomans placated or even to retain Mehmed's confidence in their ability to control their domain, Mehmed turned from ostensibly more important matters such as Serbia and Hungary toward the Roman statelet. Internal division had, once more, rendered the primary contributor to Moreot survival ineffective. Unable to be controlled, the Despotate was destroyed.

Military

While the diplomatic skill of the Moreot rulers helped secure its conquests and continued existence, their military was not as capable and played a significantly more minor role in the Morea's expansion than is traditionally assumed. While Manuel Kantakouzenos enjoyed success against limited Turkish raids during his reign, the number of Turkish attacks that managed to breach the Hexamilion suggests that the general prospect of Roman armies keeping the Morea as a more-or-less independent island to defend against the Turks left much to be desired.⁵² The military efficacy of the Moreot army, or its lack thereof, is shown in the capture of Patras; the campaign which finally captured the city followed one which failed, ostensibly due to the failure of the despots to adequately

⁴⁸ Sphrantzes, *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 74.

⁴⁹ Michael Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, trans. Charles T. Riggs (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press), p. 85.

⁵⁰ Sphrantzes, *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 77.

⁵¹ Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, pp. 125-7; Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*, p. 319.

⁵² Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 532; Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army*, p. 210.

coordinate their armies, with Theodore II vacillating between action and withdrawal.⁵³ The campaign which did capture Patras almost saw Constantine fall into a trap and face death or imprisonment; a fate averted only by the intervention of Sphrantzes.⁵⁴ These failures against the enfeebled Latin principalities suggest that the Moreot army was small and relatively weak, enhanced only by the supply of Albanian mercenaries settled and organized by Theodore I. The Romans fared even worse against the Ottomans, whose technological, financial, and military expertise made them a threat even to major Christian powers, and almost unstoppable to the Balkan principalities of the 15th century. Aside from the earlier Ottoman raids, this can be seen in Constantine's military campaign against Athens, Thebes, and Thessaly from 1444-1446, which resulted in the Ottoman breach of the Hexamilion and subjection of the Despotate to a hefty tribute in exchange for no territorial or material gains.⁵⁵ The campaign saw the Moreot army, Roman and Albanian alike, flee the Hexamilion under assaults from the elite janissaries⁵⁶ and Ottoman artillery fire. The total collapse of discipline resulted in a rout that forced Constantine and Thomas to flee to their capital at Mystras.⁵⁷ This campaign was so disastrous that Sphrantzes, who would have witnessed all of these events as an important governor under Constantine, makes no mention of it, merely beginning his account of the sordid affair with "On 27 November of [1446], the sultan [Murad II] marched against the Hexamilion, stormed it..Then he advanced all the way to Patras."⁵⁸ Considering that modern scholars have tended to look at Constantine's campaign as an example of his vitality and determination, the fact that Sphrantzes makes no mention of it when he otherwise displays little but praise for his friend and master indicates that even contemporaries sympathetic to the Roman cause saw it as an embarrassing failure of leadership, discipline, and prudence - a vainglorious and overambitious decision further undermined by the poor quality of the Moreot army.⁵⁹ It is, therefore, clear that the military prowess of the Morea was not as considerable a factor in its success as might appear at first glance.

This is not to say that the Moreot soldiery enjoyed no success, even against the Ottomans. One of the last Roman naval victories was fought between the forces of the Morea and those of the Tocco in Cephalonia,⁶⁰ near the site of Actium, in 1427.⁶¹ The defeat inflicted upon the Tocco fiefdoms in Greece precipitated the marriage alliance with Constantine, which precipitated the

⁵³ Sphrantzes, *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 33.

⁵⁴ Philippides, *Constantine XI Dragas Palaiologos*, pp. 113-5.

⁵⁵ Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*, p. 117.

⁵⁶ The janissaries were an elite corps of soldiers, established near the end of the 14th century, who were recruited from Christian families as children in a practice known as the *devshirme*.

⁵⁷ Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*, pp. 107-17.

⁵⁸ Sphrantzes, *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 56.

⁵⁹ Philippides, *Constantine XI Dragas Palaiologos*, pp. 188-90.

⁶⁰ Cephalonia is an island off the northwestern coast of the Morea.

⁶¹ Raffaele D'Amato, *Byzantine Naval Forces 1261-1453: The Roman Empire's Last Marines* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing), pp. 107-8, Scribd edition.

diplomatic takeover of the Peloponnese.⁶² The Romans in the Morea proved to be determined opponents on the defensive, whether ambushing Ottoman detachments or defending their acropolites. Patras, the same citadel which had held out for a year against Constantine's efforts, similarly frustrated the Ottomans' attempt to take the citadel in their 1446 campaign, even with the use of the elite janissaries in their assault.⁶³ Salmeniko Castle, too, held out for more than a year against determined Ottoman attack, even under the personal command of Sultan Mehmed II and against artillery, until the garrison made good its escape to Venetian territory, earning respect even of Ottoman commanders.⁶⁴ An under-discussed engagement, however, comes during the Ottoman raid on the Morea in 1452 as part of the prelude to the Ottoman Siege of Constantinople. Turahan Bey, the beylerbey of Thessaly, had been ordered to tie down the Moreots so no aid could be sent to Constantinople. While their raid did penetrate the defenses at the Isthmus, the Moreots successfully ambushed a large Ottoman column. They captured Turahan's son, Turahanoglu Ahmed, who would remain in Moreot custody for several years.⁶⁵ The capture of the son of a beylerbeyi (top-level provincial governor), who by all accounts was leading a significant part of the Ottoman forces, shows that the Moreot army was not helpless by any means and could put up considerable resistance to numerically and technologically superior Ottoman forces under the right circumstances. While the army of the Morea seemed to have been of only slightly higher quality than that of its Constantinopolitan counterpart and was by no means as effective an instrument of foreign policy as first glance would indicate, neither was it a purely impotent military power. However, the greatest successes of the Despotate came not from martial action alone, but from diplomacy, with military force playing a secondary role.

Conclusion

The success the Despotate enjoyed was largely due to its geographical position relative to the Ottoman Empire. The Morea enjoyed success relative to Constantinople, as it was still afflicted by many problems and failures which helped undermine its conquests against the Latins in Greece and its resistance to Ottoman incursions. Once foreign policy calculus shifted with the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Despotate's survival became untenable. On the other hand, the Despotate displayed an ability to use its limited resources and fortunate position to its advantage, as it turned itself into a center of culture in the early Renaissance as important, if not more, than Constantinople itself. The Ottoman Sultans' natural factors and aims dictated the Morea's survival as a semi-independent polity. Still, the efforts of its rulers were able to use both to their advantage admirably.

The significance of arguing against a nationalist reading of the Morea, that it showed itself to be a strong and vitalist counterpart, is because the Greek nationalist reading put forward by Plethon

⁶² Philippides, *Constantine XI Dragas Palaiologos*, p. 109.

⁶³ Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*, p. 117.

⁶⁴ Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*, p. 343.

⁶⁵ Makarios Melissenos, *The Chronicle of the Siege of Constantinople* trans. Marios Philippides (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), pp. 80-81; Sphrantzes, p. 69; Chalkokondyles, p. 171.

and repeated through the centuries, is harmful to understanding the field of Byzantine Studies as a whole. Plethon and his student, Chalkokondyles, were not particularly interested in the history of the Roman Empire between the foundation of Constantinople and the time in which they lived, lamenting the hard times in which their people had fallen and seeking to restore it to what they saw as the Hellenes' glory days, a formula continuing well into the modern era.⁶⁶ By re-framing the Morea's prolonged survival and eventual fall in terms of its concrete actions, failures, and ambiguous relations with surrounding powers, we better understand the deeper issues that the Despotate struggled with and gain a deeper insight into the structures of Late Byzantine politics. Furthermore, such an examination helps illustrate how the Ottomans and their smaller Balkan opponents interacted with one another by showing the complexities of their political relationships; the Ottomans were not obsessed with conquering all their opponents and annexing their territory but were very willing to work with and accommodate cooperative principalities that they encountered.

The problems the Morea faced show the limitations of how successful the Morea was as a political entity. These issues are intrinsically incompatible with the narrative that the Morea represented a staunch bulwark of Hellenic nationalism and vitality compared to the decrepit imperial capital—as seen by the frequent and extremely personal divisions which laid the Despotate low in its final years. The narrative of Hellenic martial glory is also undermined by its dependence upon the Albanian tribes as soldiers, with whom there was also conflict. Aside from the cultural and intellectual worlds, there was no great Hellenic revival, no resurgence of ancient glory. The Despotate's relative success was largely due to external factors that its rulers could respond to but could not wholly change. The "reconquest" of the Peloponnese by the Morea was achieved most directly through political marriage, a custom borrowed from the West, much like the concept of imperial appanages which spawned the Despotate itself. The Morea, rather than being a gleaming island of Classical revival, was a mix of cultures and traditions that lived at the mercy of the Ottoman Empire, whose foreign policy decisions were dictated by geography, one of the few fortunes the Despotate truly enjoyed. The New Sparta, the bastion of a glorious Hellenic rebirth, was a myth. The real Morea was far more mundane in its survival, troubles, and eventual fall than the utopian vision proposed by Plethon.

⁶⁶ Anthony Kaldellis, *A New Herodotos: Laonikos Chalkokondyles on the Ottoman Empire, the Fall of Byzantium, and the Emergence of the West* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 216-218.

Appendix

Figure 1: “Map of the Medieval Peloponnese with its principal localities.”

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=10084390>



Figure 2: “Isthmus von Korinth.” <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2261252>



Figure 3: “Eastern Mediterranean 1450 AD,”

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1942033>



Figure 4: “Palace of the Despots at Mystras.”

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3996551>



Figure 5: “Despotate of the Morea ca. 1450 AD.”

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1943532>

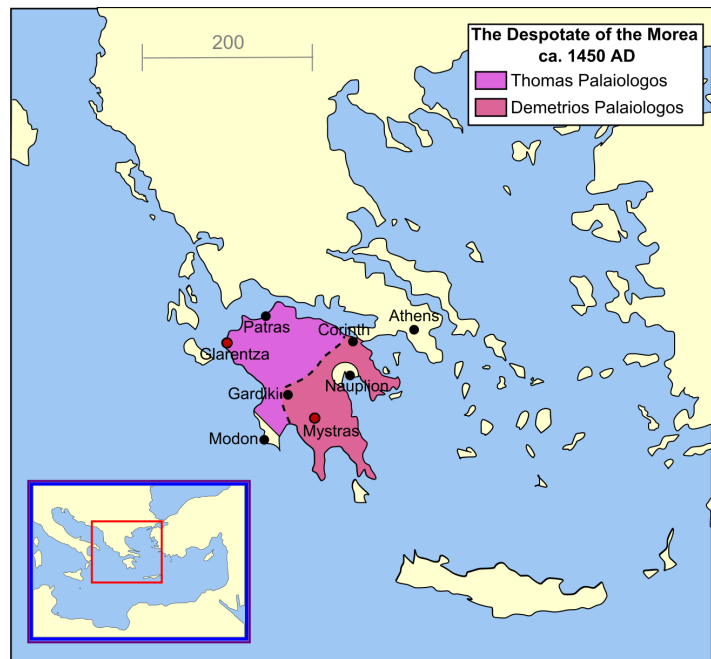


Figure 6: “Map of the Southern Balkans, 1410.”

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=67611502>

