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THE POWER OF VIRTUE. THE CASE OF THE LAST PALAIOLOGOI¹

“Bayezid, Manuel’s enemy, had once remarked that even if one did not know the emperor, Manuel’s appearance would make one to say: «This man must be an emperor»”². Two important factors of my story are very clear in this small quotation. First, that Byzantium was in great danger because of the Osmanlis Turks, and second, that Manuel II Palaiologos kept his personal dignity in spite of this danger and the humiliating situation of the Empire.

Byzantium, which was also called the Second Rome, enjoyed power and respect of the world throughout the centuries. The Fourth Crusade in 1204 introduced the Latin occupation of Constantinople for almost 60 years and for much longer time in other Byzantine territories such as Beotia, Attica and Peloponnese³. This was the beginning of the end. In 1261 Michael VIII Palaiologos managed to restore the Byzantine rule on the Bosporos but he was too weak to reconstruct the Empire from

1 This text was written during my stay at Rice University in Houston, and presented at the Thirty-Third Sewanee Medieval Symposium devoted to “Power in the Middle Ages” on 7 April 2006. At Rice I had lectures about contemporary Polish poetry, and Herbert’s poem inspired me to draw the attention of my audience to other power than economic and political ones. I was the only Byzantinist among forty speakers, dealing with history of the Middle Ages in general. This is why I included some data which are obvious to specialists from my field of studies.

2 George Sphrantzes, *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire 1401-1477*, transl. by M. Phillipides, Amherst 1980, p. 28.

3 There are numerous works about the crusade of 1204. Among them: D. Queller, *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople 1201-1204*, Pennsylvania 1977; J. Godfrey, *1204: The Unholy Crusade*, Oxford 1980. As to the Latin Empire and the Principality of Achaia, one cannot overestimate J. Longnon, *L’Empire latin de Constantinople et la principauté de Moree*, Paris 1949 and A. Bon, *La Moree franque*, vol. I-II, Paris 1969-1972.

before 1204. Worse still, he risked the repetition of the Fourth Crusade since many Western authorities could not agree with the loss of Constantinople. To avoid the invasion, Michael offered to sign the Church union. It was a very smart move, as the agreement with Rome deprived the aggressors of such argument as the fight against the schismatics⁴. The union of Lyons, signed in 1274, did not last long but it saved the life of the Empire for almost two centuries. For all that time, till the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Byzantium had been ruled by the dynasty of Palaiologoi. The Osmanlis in Asia Minor, who emerged from a small emirate to a great power, became their mortal enemy. After getting Gallipoli in 1356, they settled in Europe and soon conquered Adrianople, the main town in Thrace⁵. It was only three days' way from Constantinople. The verdict was ready. Its fulfillment was only a question of time. John V Palaiologos was desperately looking for military help in the West, and he needed the Pope's authority for promoting crusade against the Turks. Yet his personal conversion to the Roman faith in 1369 did not bring about any expedition⁶. In the meantime, the Ottomans demonstrated their power. In 1371 in the battle on the Marica river, they defeated the Serbian army. Neither Western nor Balkan forces proved effective in the Byzantine case then. Facing this disappointment, John V submitted to the Turks in 1372/1373⁷. Both he and his son, the future Manuel II, became Sultan Murad's vassals.

From the perspective of Byzantine philosophy of the State, where the Emperor was God's representative on the Earth, this situation was humiliating and unbearable, but there was no other way out. Manuel II Palaiologos tried to do his best to gain the support of the West for his cause. The tragic events which happened at the beginning of his reign, paradoxically helped him. Manuel, as a forty-year-old man, succeeded his father in March 1391, escaping from the Turkish camp, where he had served the Sultan. Then, unfortunately, he was obliged to return as a good servant, trying to calm the anger of Bayezid. Next

4 Cf. D. J. Geanakoplos, *Emperor Michael Palaeologus and the West 1258-1282: A Study in Late Byzantine-Latin Relations*, Cambridge Mass. 1959; H. Evert-Kappesowa, *Byzance et Saint Siege a l'epoque de l'Union de Lyon*, "Byzantinoslavica" XVI, 1955, pp. 297-317 and other articles on Lyon by this author; B. Roberg, *Das Zweite Konzil von Lyon (1274)*, Padenborn 1990.

5 D. M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium 1261-1453*, 2nd edition, Cambridge 1993, p. 274.

6 On John V's efforts concerning the support of the Papacy cf. the classical work by O. Halecki, *Un empereur de Byzance a Rome. Vingt ans de travail pour la defense de l'empire d'Orient, 1355-1375*, Varsovie 1930 and general observations – J. Gill, *Byzantium and the Papacy 1198-1400*, New Brunswick, N.J. 1979; K. M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant (1204-1571)*, vol. I, *The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, Philadelphia 1976.

7 There is still a discussion among the scholars when this treaty of submission was signed. Anyway, at the beginning of 1373 John V served already as a vassal in Sultan Murad's camp and was obliged to pay tribute to him. Cf. D. M. Nicol, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

year the Emperor was invited by him to Serres and, to his surprise, he met all the members of his family. The Sultan was ready to eliminate the Palaiologian dynasty, but he changed his mind on the next day and allowed everybody to go back home, offering gifts as a consolation after such a "clinical" stress⁸. This was a good lesson for the well-mannered Emperor. He refused to serve the emotionally unstable Sultan, to which Bayezid reacted by the blockade of Constantinople in the autumn of 1394. In the meantime he conquered Bulgaria, taking its capital, Trnovo in 1393. These events frightened Hungary and provoked the international expedition, led by its King, Sigismund of Luxemburg. He had family connections in France, so many nobles from there joined him, but the army was defeated by Bayezid at Nikopolis in 1396. Then the Sultan asked for the surrender of Constantinople, which Manuel refused. Next year Manuel sent his envoys to the Pope, and the rulers of France, England and Aragon. He also appealed to the Orthodox Prince of Muscovy. He counted particularly on the testimony of the French nobles, taken as prisoners at Nikopolis and released after paying a great ransom. His calculation did not disappoint him, but the results were not so great as he expected. Only sick Charles VI of France responded and sent a support of 1200 armed men, who overcame the blockade and were received in Constantinople with enthusiasm⁹. This assistance, however, was not sufficient. Therefore, Manuel decided to go to the Western courts by himself, and he started his long journey at the end of 1399. It is a good moment to quote a Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert:

*Be courageous when the mind deceives you, be courageous
In the final account only this is important (...)
Beware however of unnecessary pride
Keep looking at your clown's face in the mirror
Repeat: I was called – weren't there better than I am...¹⁰*

Manuel was called, as "there were no better...". Actually, he was the best. There is no time at the moment to prove that he was one of the most interesting Byzantine rulers. Intelligent and well educated, he distinguished himself by his noble appearance and physical agility. This was Bayezid's view of him, and this was the reaction of the Western chroniclers, especially the French, who noticed how much Manuel impressed people. A very detailed report was given by an anonymous monk from the Abbey of Saint Denis. "The Emperor, dressed in his im-

8 J. W. Barker, *Manuel II Palaeologus (1391-1425). A Study in Late Byzantine Statesmanship*, New Brunswick, N.J. 1968, pp. 112-118.

9 *Ibidem*, pp. 160-164.

10 Z. Herbert, *The Envoy of Mr. Cogito*, [in:] *Mr. Cogito*, transl. by J. Carpenter and Bogdana Carpenter, Hopewell, NJ, 1993, p. 61.

perial garb of white silk, seated himself on the white horse presented to him by the King (Charles VI of France) during his journey, mounting it nimbly without even deigning to set a foot upon the ground (i.e. in transferring himself from his own horse to the white one). And those who – while marking his moderate stature, distinguished by a manly chest and by yet firmer limbs, though under a long beard and showing white hair everywhere – yet heed of the grace of his countenance, adjudged him indeed worthy of imperial rule”¹¹. He was begging for help but he did not behave like a beggar. Neither in his relations with the Turks, whom he refused to surrender Constantinople, nor during his western journey, when a question of military and financial support was frequently stated, did he give an occasion to humiliate him. This does not mean that he did not feel upset and powerless when he was alone with his mind. Due to his letters written to Byzantine intellectuals, among others: to Manuel Chrysoloras, teaching in Florence, we have an interesting testimony of the difficulties he was coping with. “Often have I wished to write to you. But the fact that I did not yet have such things to write by which you would be pleased held back my hand. For the route was troublesome, and the events along it were not particularly pleasant. And, in addition, there was the change of language, which did not allow the contacts with men who are quite admirable and quite desirous of pleasing me.” Then Manuel turns to describe his stay in France and warm welcome from the king and his court. This friendly attitude of Paris allows him to write: “unless the customary envy of evil fortune should oppose, and unless some dreadful kind of unexpected obstacles should suddenly appear, there is great hope of my returning speedily to our homeland, for which, as I know, you on your part are praying, and against which on their side our enemies are praying”¹². Like the whole stay of Manuel in the West this letter proves that he did not waste his time and wanted to come back as soon as possible but not with empty hands. Therefore it is unacceptable to treat the Emperor’s journey as a tourist holiday. J. W. Barker is against such an interpretation, and so am I¹³. Manuel did not gain much, as his

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- 11 *Chronique du Religieux de Saint Denis contenant le regne de Charles VI, de 1380 a 1422*, ed. M. G. Bellaquet, vol II, Paris 1842, p. 756; English translation by J. W. Barker, *op. cit.*, p. 397. Cf. M. Dąbrowska, *Falszywy patriarcha Konstantynopola i prawdziwy cesarz Bizancjum w Paryżu u schyłku XIV w. (Le faux patriarche de Constantinople et le vrai empereur de Byzance à Paris à la fin du XIVe siècle)*, “Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis. Folia Historica” 44, 1992, pp. 75-90.
 - 12 *Lettres de l'empereur Manuel Paleologue*, ed. E. Legrand, Paris 1893, pp. 50-51 (later: *Lettres*); translated by J. W. Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 175. Unfortunately, I have no access here to the new edition of this fascinating correspondence. Cf. *The Letters of Manuel II Palaeologus: Text, Translation and Notes*, ed. G. T. Dennis, Washington D.C. 1977.
 - 13 J. W. Barker (*op. cit.*, 193) confronting mainly G. Ostrogorsky’s statement that “it almost looked as though Manuel felt that he could not face the return, for he broke his journey in Paris and stayed there for nearly two years, although he could have no illusions about the possibility of

supposed protectors created hope for great help which turned out to be vain. This was exactly the impression that Manuel had in London. He wrote that king Henry IV Lancaster “established a virtual heaven for us in the midst of a twofold tempest – both of the season and of the fortune – in himself and in his gestures toward us who have come into his port. And he appears very pleasant in his conversations, gladdening us in all ways and honoring us as much as possible ... He furnishes us with a military assistance of men-at-arms and archers and money and ships which will convey the army wherever it is necessary”¹⁴. This proved to be a great disappointment. Manuel came back to Paris with gifts and some money. His humiliating situation met with the sympathy of the English chronicler: “I thought myself, what a grievous thing it was that this great Christian prince from the farther east should perforce be driven by unbelievers to visit islands of the west, to seek aid against them. My God! What dost thou, ancient glory of Rome?”¹⁵ After Manuel’s return, the French lost their first enthusiasm and remembered that the emperor was Orthodox, that is schismatic, however, at that time France was in its own schism with the papacy¹⁶. He avoided any promise of the Church Union, as he was very attached to his faith. On the other hand, however, there was no serious necessity to discuss this question as a condition of western support, because the papacy was divided, and so was the western Christianity. The battle of Ankara of 1402, where Bayezid was defeated by Tamerlane, changed the situation of Byzantium completely. The emperor was not Turkish vassal any more. Manuel II Palaiologos returned home in 1403, full of hopes and with the supply of 1200 French soldiers, offered to him by Charles VI of France.

The Empire enjoyed the peace from the Ottoman State till 1421. Byzantium profited by the time of internal troubles of the Osmanlis; using one of Bayezid’s sons against another, but this did not last long. The new sultan, Murad II, did not tolerate any Byzantine interference and in response to it, he besieged Constantinople in 1422. At that time Manuel was very old and sick because of the stroke. He transferred the rule to his son, future John VIII. The young emperor had illusions for the western support, but when his hopes connected with Venice and

getting any help”. G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, transl. from German by J. M. Hussey, New Brunswick, N.J. 1957, p. 494; M. Dąbrowska, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

14 *Lettres*, 51-52; English translation by J. W. Barker, *op. cit.*, p. 179-180.

15 *Chronicon Adae de Usk, A.D. 1377-1421*, ed. and transl. by E. M. Thompson, (2nd ed.) London 1904, p. 219.

16 M. Dąbrowska, *Francja i Bizancjum w okresie wielkiej schizmy zachodniej (France et Byzance dans le temps du grand schisme de l’Occident)*, “Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Historica”, 48, 1993, pp. 127-141.

Hungary turned out to be vain, he signed a treaty in 1424, according to which Byzantium became the Turkish vassal once again¹⁷.

In the meantime the papacy recovered from the great schism and could offer a support but under the condition of the Church union. This was the traditional Byzantine card in a political game but now there was no time to play it in order to gain a delay. The pressure was too strong. Manuel, however, was consistent in encouraging his son to make negotiations as long as possible. He was happy that he would not face the union himself. "The infidels are very worried that we might unite and come to agreement with the Christians of the west" he said but his advice was not to put the union into practice as "our people are not in the frame of mind to discover a way of uniting with the Latins"¹⁸. Manuel II died in 1425. John and his brothers, among them Constantine, the last Byzantine emperor, managed to recover Peloponnese from the Latins by 1430¹⁹. The Turks, however, did not tolerate such independent moves of their vassals, and in the same year they conquered Thessalonica, the second city of the Empire. Then, in the very same year, Ioannina, the important town in Epiros, surrendered to them²⁰. Days of Constantinople were numbered. On the one hand the Palaiologoi enjoyed the restoration of the Byzantine rule in Peloponnese, protected by the fortress called Hexamilion, which was not an obstacle for the Ottomans²¹. On the other hand, they realized that the Church union could be the only rescue in the imminent disaster. In 1430 John VIII started negotiations with the Papacy. He was aware of a possible negative reaction of the Byzantines, but had no other way out. Finally, at the end of November 1437 he, the Patriarch, bishops and the rest of the huge delegation left Constantinople for the Council in Ferrara. They arrived in Venice at the beginning of March the next year. The sea voyage was made in winter, in difficult conditions. "The Patriarch and the other aged prelates, and sometimes the Emperor too, neither ate nor drank nor slept, except in port. So, if there had not been numerous islands with harbors under the domination of Venetians or

17 D. M. Nicol, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

18 *Chronikon minus. Georgios Sphrantzes Memorii 1401-1477. In anexă Pseudo-Phrantzes, Macariae Melissenos, Cronica 1258-1481*, ed. V. Grecu, Bucharest 1966, p. 320; English translation by D. M. Nicol, *op. cit.*, p. 358. Sphrantzes' short chronicle was translated into English by M. Philippides (cf. note 1), Melissenos still waits.

19 Only Venetians managed to keep their three ports. Cf. D. A. Zakythinos, *Le despotat grec de Moree*, vol. I. *Histoire politique*, Paris 1932, pp. 219-221.

20 D. M. Nicol, *The Despotate of Epiros 1267-1479. A Contribution to the History of Greece in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1984, pp. 202-203.

21 Cf. M. Dąbrowska, *Hexamilion i Warna*, "Balcanica Posnaniensia" VIII, 1997, pp. 61-70. Analysis of Byzantine and Western sources allows to prove that Byzantium was very attached to the idea of independent Peloponnese, trying to omit Latin pretensions to this territory. It seems that the Church Union was necessary for this purpose as well as for protecting Constantinople from the Turks.

of the Greeks themselves, assuredly they would not have been able to reach the port of Venice²². Apparently, the voyage of nearly fifty-year-old John VIII was as difficult as the one made by his father Manuel II, who was the same age when he left for the West. The Venetian reception of John was truly imperial. The Doge met the Emperor's ship in his ceremonial barge. The oarsmen wore caps with the emblems of Venice and the dynasty of Palaiologoi. After a pompous reception, the delegation left for Ferrara. John, suffering from gout, rode on horseback and, in accordance with the Byzantine etiquette, he did not want to dismount, that is, to touch the ground in front of the Papal residence. He was carried discreetly through the rooms up to his throne²³. After some more protocol complications the negotiations started and Ambrogio Traversari noted: "There are among them (i.e. the Greeks) many learned men, excellently disposed towards us. But the Emperor and the Patriarch surpass them all in such disposition"²⁴. At the end of 1438 the Council was transferred to Florence, where finally the Union was signed on the 5 July in 1439. One-and-half-year negotiations prove that it was not easy²⁵. After such sacrifice, the Byzantines could have expected a real military help, as they ceased to be schismatics for the western world. Pope Eugenius IV, who financed in great part the stay of 700 Greek delegates in Italy, could not supply troops. He launched a crusade and sent his ambassadors to European courts. The only response came from Polish-Hungarian king Ladislas, who defeated the Turks in the winter war of 1443-1444, and signed a truce with Murad II, but then broke it, stood up against the Sultan, and was defeated at Varna on the 10 of November in 1444²⁶. John VIII could only congratulate his enemy on the victory. In the same year his brother, the future Constantine XI, rebuilt the Hexamilion wall on the Isthmus of Corinth and gained control over the Duchy of Athens, which was in Latin hands²⁷. Disappointed by the Union, and aware of the fact that it was unacceptable to many of his subjects, the Emperor did not proclaim it in Constantinople. In 1446 the Sultan invaded Morea and reduced it to a tributary province. The dreams of independent Peloponnese did not last long. The Union turned out to be fruitless. John, however, re-

22 *Relation of the bishop of Digne*, [in:] *Fragmenta protocoli, diaria privata, sermones*, ed. G. Hofmann, Romae 1959; translated by J. Gill, *Personalities of the Council of Florence and Other Essays*, New York 1964, p. 17.

23 *Ibidem*, p. 24.

24 *Ambrosii Traversari ... latinae epistolae*, ed. L. Mehus, Firenze 1759; transl. by J. Gill, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

25 The details – J. Gill, *The Council of Florence*, Cambridge 1959.

26 D. M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries ...*, pp. 362-363.

27 D. M. Zakythinos, *op. cit.*, 226-231; D. M. Nicol, *The Immortal Emperor. The Life and Legend of Constantine Palaiologos, Last Emperor of the Romans*, Cambridge 1992, pp. 23-29. Polish translation of that book by M. Dąbrowska, Gdańsk 2004; M. Dąbrowska, *Hexamilion...*, pp. 61-70.

mained faithful to his Florentine signature. He died on the last day of October in 1448, and was buried without Orthodox funeral. Childless, he left the crown to his brother, Constantine. Troubled by his illness, long Italian voyage, and equally long negotiations, John VIII, managed to preserve his image full of personal dignity and normal courtly life. There is a nice testimony by Nicolas Notaras who wrote: "because besides the other high qualities that God has given him is his frequent exercising of young men in the chase by often going out for that purpose, which gives not only that pleasure and satisfaction, but is by its nature an introduction to almost all military training and soldierly experience"²⁸. Probably the best recollection of Italy were the hounds, which the Emperor brought from his journey.

*Go where those others went to the dark boundary
for the golden fleece of nothingness your last prize
go upright among those who are on their knees ...*²⁹

These words by Herbert would be an adequate comment on John VIII's efforts.

After his brother's death, Constantine left Morea and reached Constantinople in early March of 1449. He was proclaimed the Emperor at his court in the Peloponnese, but there was no traditional coronation. He immediately paid his homage to Murad and asked for a treaty of peace. The Sultan profited by the disagreement between Constantine's brothers: Demetrius and Thomas, promoting the first one against the latter, and against the Emperor himself. The new Byzantine ruler managed to prevent the fratricidal war at the end of 1450, but the tension remained³⁰. At the beginning of the next year Murad II died in Adrianople, and his nearly twenty-year-old son, Mehmed II, succeeded him. The conquest of Constantinople had always been his dream. His enemy, Constantine, was about twenty years his senior, and like his predecessor on the throne, he was childless. Whether he had a successor or not, his confrontation with the Turkish power had little chance for victory. There was no time to discuss whether the Union had been a mistake. On the 12 of December in 1452 Catholic and Orthodox liturgy was celebrated in Hagia Sophia. It was high time to forget about the trauma left by the Latins after the Fourth Crusade. The Emperor marshaled his people and prepared the city for defence. 700 soldiers under Giustiniani Longo from Genoa joined him. About 30 Venetian

28 *Palaiologeia kai Peloponesiaka*, ed. Sp. P. Lambros, t. II, Athenai 1912, p. 184; translated by J. Gill, *Personalities...*, p. 113. There is a very good contemporary book about John VIII by I. Djurić, *Sumrak Vizantije. Vreme Jovana VIII Paleologa 1392-1448*, Beograd 1984, also translated into French. It was inaccessible for me here.

29 Z. Herbert, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

30 D. M. Nicol, *The Immortal Emperor...*, pp. 36-37.

ships were in the Golden Horn ready to fight. Cardinal Isidore, the Papal legate, appeared in Constantinople with 200 Neapolitan archers hired by him. This was a symbolic consolidation of Europe against the Turks. Mehmed surrounded Constantinople on Easter Monday, 2 April 1453. The first bombardments of the famous walls started 4 days later. The proportion of forces did not leave any illusions. Outside were approximately 80 thousand attackers, inside – 7 thousand defenders³¹. At the end of April Constantine sent his envoys to the Sultan asking for peace. In return, he received an offer to surrender the City. He refused. His advisers asked him to escape and create a conspiracy in exile. He refused. On the 28 of May, a day before the final assault, he organized a solemn procession with icons and then delivered an unforgettable speech to his court. “Gentlemen” –he said – “illustrious captains of the army, and our most Christian comrades in arms: we now see the hour of battle approaching. (...) that this is the day of your glory – a day on which, if you shed but a drop of blood, you will win for yourselves crowns of martyrdom and eternal fame”³². Constantine died on the next day, fighting on the walls like an ordinary soldier. Kritoboulos of Imbros wrote that the Emperor “was a wise and moderate man in his private life and diligent to the highest degree in prudence and virtue, sagacious as the most disciplined of men. In political affairs and in matters of government he yielded to no one of the Emperors before him in preeminence. Quick to perceive his duty, and quicker still to do it, he was eloquent in speech, clever in thought...”³³

Constantine looked for death, for he did not want to be taken alive. He cried: “«Is there no one among Christians who will take my head from me?» He was abandoned and alone”. Then one of the Turks struck him in the face and wounded him. He in turn struck back. But another gave him a mortal blow from behind. This is an account by a Byzantine chronicler, Doukas, who added that Constantine was not recognized, since he fought as common man. Then, when the Turks discovered, whom they killed, Mehmed ordered to cut off the Emperor’s head, hang it on the column, peel the skin off the body and stuff it with straw³⁴. According to Melissenos, who compiled the memoirs of George Sphrantzes: “The Sultan was delighted (when Constantine was identified) and commanded some Christians to bury the body with due

31 S. Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople 1453*, Cambridge 1965, p. 85.

32 Three accounts of the speech survived. Leonardo of Chios’ testimony proved to be the most reliable and was translated by D. M. Nicol, *The Immortal Emperor...*, pp. 67-68. Cf. S. Runciman, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-131.

33 *Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae*, ed. D. R. Reinsch, Berlin-New York 1983, 80-82; English translation by C. T. Riggs, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror by Kritovoulos*, Princeton N.J. 1954, p. 81. Cf. D. M. Nicol, *The Immortal Emperor ...*, p. 70.

34 Doukas, *Decline and fall of Byzantium to the Ottoman Turks*, transl. by H. J. Magoulias, Detroit 1975, p. 324sq; D. M. Nicol, *The Immortal Emperor...*, p. 85.

honor"³⁵. The great contradiction is visible even in these two descriptions. We do not know, where Constantine was buried, probably without respect for his body. The Turks did not find his regalia, "for the Lady, the Mother of God, took them with her to keep until such time as there would be mercy for the wretched race of Christians"³⁶. This story remained in the legends of the Greeks, who blamed themselves for their sinful behavior which was punished by Heaven:

*They will reward you with what they have at hand
with the whip of laughter with murder on a garbage heap,*³⁷
the poet will say.

Manuel II Palaiologos and his sons: John VIII and Constantine XI showed power, which had nothing in common with military or economic strength. They neither had the army to protect the Empire nor the money to hire mercenaries or pay tribute to the Sultan. They could not count on the West. Still, they considered and then signed the Church Union, which did not save them. Their situation was lamentable, but there was something in their behavior that could be called invisible power, although their State was visibly powerless. This was the power of virtue, this particular value, so unfashionable today, which allowed them to pass into history in an honorable way. History challenged them and they answered this challenge.

*Go because only in this way will you be admitted to the company of
old skulls
to the company of your ancestors: Gilgamesh Hector Roland
the defenders of the kingdom without limit and the city of ashes
Be faithful Go*³⁸

And so, they went.

Houston, TX, 25/26 March 2006

35 Phrantzes, *Chronicon maius*, 428-430; transl. by D. M. Nicol, *The Immortal Emperor...*, p. 86.

36 *Anonymi Monodia*, [in:] *Monodiai kai threnoi epi te alosei tes Konstantinopoleos*, ed. Sp. Lambros – "Neos Ellenomnemon" 5, 1908, pp. 248-250; transl. by D. M. Nicol, *The Immortal...*, p. 90.

37 Z. Herbert, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

38 *L. cit.*

Potęga godności. Przypadek ostatnich Paleologów. (Streszczenie)

Tekst ten został napisany na konferencję pt.: *Potęga w średniowieczu*, zorganizowaną przez Uniwersytet w Swanee (Tennessee). Dla bizantynisty zajmującego się schyłkiem cesarstwa zaprezentowanie referatu pod kątem stereotypowego pojęcia potęgi jako siły politycznej, ekonomicznej czy wojskowej, miało się z celem. Sytuacja Bizancjum w XIV-XV w. była pod każdym względem zaprzeczeniem tego słowa. Jest jednak coś, co fascynuje badaczy w schyłkowej historii średniowiecznego imperium rzymskiego. To niewątpliwie postawy władców, którym los rzucił wyzwanie ratowania państwa przed niechybnym upadkiem. Na przekór okolicznościom podjęli to wyzwanie ostatni trzej cesarze. Manuel II Paleolog pojechał na Zachód niemal żebrząc o pomoc przeciw Turkom Osmańskim i tak dalece wyróżniał się godnością, że nikt nie pozwolił sobie na zlekceważenie jego obecności. Syn Manuela, Jan VIII, zdecydował się, z tych samych powodów, na unię kościelną z Rzymem, postępując wbrew powszechnej opinii swych poddanych. Utrudzony podróżą, przyjechał do Italii z podniesionym czołem. Konstantyn XI, ostatni władca Bizancjum, syn Manuela i brat Jana VIII, podjął się honorowej obrony Konstantynopola, choć proponowano mu poddanie miasta i ucieczkę, co oznaczało uratowanie głowy. Nie przyjął tego. *Przesłanie Pana Cogito* Zbigniewa Herberta stosuje się do każdego z nich:

*Idź dokąd poszli tamci - do ciemnego kresu
po złote runo nicości twoją ostatnią nagrodę*

idź wyprostowany wśród tych co na kolanach (...)

*bądź odważny gdy rozum zawodzi bądź odważny
w ostatecznym rachunku jedynie to się liczy*

W ostatecznym rachunku jedynie to się liczy...