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HELLENISM AT THE COURT OF DESPOTS OF MISTRA IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

This paper does not dwell on the philosophy of George Gemistos Plethon. His views have been studied by many experts, therefore I am going to limit myself to presenting the fundamentals of his religious system. What is of greatest interest to me, is Plethon's influence upon the milieu in which he existed. Did the period of his stay in Mistra generate some particular intellectual ambiance? Who supported him as a philosopher drawing on Platonism? Who defended him from the attacks of the Church? Did Plethon's paganism leave any traces in Peloponnese? Did he have any followers? What was the attitude towards Plethon as a philosopher and Plethon as the author of new religion?

Based on polytheism of ancient Greece, Plato and neoplatonic philosophy, Plethon's views clashed with the official Church doctrine. It had long been forbidden to read Plato. Byzantine Orthodoxy, however, used some elements of ancient philosophy. They came from Aristotle's system to a large extent, and the Church only adopted the thoughts which could be reconciled with Christianity. The closing down of Platonic Academy in 529 meant putting an end to the free propagation of pagan philosophy in Byzantium.

In the eleventh century Michael Psellos attempted to revive Plato's philosophy. Despite his strong position in the court, he was suspected of paganism by the clergy who made him say the

Creed publicly¹. His disciple, John Italos, was banished. Emperor Alexios Komnenos, the defender of Orthodoxy, prevented the pagan thought from spreading. Subsequently, philosophy was replaced by theology. It appears that schism with Rome made the stand of Orthodox Church much more adamant. She emphasized her loyalty to the principles of the Councils and defied any new philosophical ideas which might endanger Orthodoxy.

George Gemistos Plethon was a long-lived Byzantine philosopher, and his creative years spanned the reign of Emperor Manuel II and that of his sons. Born about 1360². Plethon descended from the family of a Church dignitary. He made his views known relatively early, taking advantage of the favourable atmosphere that was due to his friendship with Manuel, the Emperor compared to Marc Aurelius and Constantine Porphyrogenitus³. As Plethon's views were rejected by the Church authorities, he was sent away from the capital by Manuel, who issued that order to please the clergy⁴.

Gemistos went to Peloponnese in the first years of the fifteenth century and he stayed in this place till his death in 1452. It was there that he created his philosophical and religious notions, and analysed them in memorials, treatises etc. He enjoyed the intellectual atmosphere of the court of Despots in Mistra. He particularly associated with Theodore II Palaiologos, Manuel II's son and he kept in touch with other members of the imperial family: Emperors — John VIII and Constantine XI, Despots — Thomas and Demetrios. In recognition of merits, Theodore II rewarded

¹ O. Jurewicz, Preface to: *Michał Psellos, Kronika czyli historia jednego stulecia Bizancjum (976-1077)*, [Michael Psellus, *Chronicle*, trans. and ed. by O. Jurewicz], Wrocław-Warszawa-Gdańsk 1985, IX.

² F. Masai, *Pléthon et le platonisme de Mistra*, Paris 1956, 54.

³ J. W. Barker, *Manuel II Palaeologus (1391-1425). A Study in the Late Byzantine Statesmanship*, New Brunswick N. J. 1968, 420.

⁴ F. Masai, op. cit., 59.

Plethon with endowments, which was confirmed by John VIII in 1428. In 1449 Constantine XI added new territories to Plethon's property⁵. It was already under the reign of Kantakouzenos family in the fourteenth century that Mistra came to play a significant role as a cultural centre. However, the era of Palaiologos rulers was definitely its heyday, and Plethon's presence largely contributed to it.

The first document testifying to Gemistos' activity in Mistra is a memorial written on the occasion of Theodore I's death in 1409. The last of his works produced subsequently is a memorial addressed to Demetrios on the occasion of his reaching agreement with his brother Thomas⁶. Memorials written in 1415–1418 for Emperor Manuel and Despot Theodore II provide us with the material concerning reforms of the state⁷. Plethon's religious system was presented in a treatise *On the Laws*. The work was not propagated during his lifetime, and after his death it was in great measure destroyed⁸.

Following Plato, Plethon indicates that the welfare of the state depends on the rules of governing. Monarchy can only function well when it is based on just laws and a ruler follows the advice of his councillors chosen from among the educated repre-

⁵ D. A. Zakythinos, *Le despotat grec de Morée 1262–1460. Histoire politique*, Paris 1932, 207, 240.

⁶ J. Longnon, *La renaissance de l'hellenisme dans le despotat de Morée*, *Journal des Savants*, juillet–septembre 1954, 131.

⁷ D. A. Zakythinos, *op. cit.*, 175–177.

⁸ F. Masai, *op. cit.*, 393–404. Cf: Plethon, *Traité des Lois*, ed. C. Alexander, Paris 1858; Russian Translation: I. P. Medvedev, *Vizantijskij gumanizm XIV–XV v.*, Leningrad 1976, 171–241; English translation: C. M. Woodhouse, *Gemistos Plethon. The Last of the Hellenes*, Oxford 1986, 322–356. I obtained this new book on Plethon after the conference, due to Dr M. Whitby. I take the opportunity to thank him here.

sentatives of middle class⁹. He also suggests launching military and fiscal reforms and making trade more effective¹⁰.

Gemistos' Hellenism originated from the bias against the Roman tradition of the Empire. His famous statement: *We are Hellenes by race and culture* is a key to his doctrine¹¹. He claimed that the destruction of Byzantium lay in the fact that it renounced the former Greek tradition and was steeped in the Roman tradition. Plethon wanted to resurrect the former positive meaning of the word "Hellene", which had become a synonym of a pagan and hence assumed a negative quality¹².

Plethon's new religion was guided by reason not faith. He claims that philosophy broadens your mind if it is freed from dogma. His dislike of Aristotelism resulted from its being adopted by Christian theology¹³. In his picture of the Universe Plethon presents neoplatonic framework. Gemistos' world comprises beings grouped in a hierarchy according to the degree of perfection.

⁹ A. E. Vacalopoulos, *Origins of the Greek Nation. The Byzantine Period 1204-1453*, New Brunswick N. J., 1973, 127.

¹⁰ Georgii Gemisti Plethonis *ad principem Theodorum de rebus peloponnesiacis oratio II*, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Graeca*, vol. 160, col. 852C.

¹¹ Idem, *Ad regem Emannuelem de rebus peloponnesiacis oratio I*, PG. vol. 160, col. 821B.

¹² Although in the time of Nicean Empire (1204-1261) efforts were made to restore the positive meaning of the word "Hellene" yet, as M. Angold observes: *it was a usage limited almost entirely to 'Belles-Lettres'. It became part and parcel of rhetorical convention.* In common use the word was synonym with the "pagan". Cf. M. Angold, *A Byzantine Government in Exile. Government and Society under Lascarids of Nicaea 1204-1261*, Oxford 1975, 30.

¹³ J. W. Tylor, *Georgius Gemistus Pletho's Criticism of Plato and Aristotle*, Menasha Wis. 1921, 8.

They include: gods, demons, human souls and material elements. According to Plethon, Zeus, the Prime Principle is the head of the Universe. It is a being that comprises all other beings. Accepting the Platonic idea of emanation, Plethon goes on to say that all beings necessarily emanate from the Prime Principle and the process of emanation is eternal¹⁴. In accordance with the neoplatonic model, the order of emanation is the order of diminishing generality and perfection. Poseidon is the first to emanate and he rules the Universe. Other gods and demons emanate earlier than human souls. Sense and immortality are the attributes of both gods and souls. What separates them is human yielding to evil and corporal union. Material elements are the last beings to emanate from the Prime Principle. In Orthodox Creed God created material world out of nothing, in Plethon's theory, matter is also eternal. This basic contradiction with Christian Orthodoxy incurred resentment of Church authorities.

The most creative criticism was levelled by George Scholarios the later patriarch Gennadios. He compared Gemistos with Emperor Julian Apostate¹⁵. The scathing attacks took place after Plethon's death. But also during his lifetime Scholarios criticized Gemistos' philosophy basing on Plato. For him and for George of Trebizond Plethon's heresy was unquestionable. The others could not detect the heterodox ideas in his teaching.

Plethon could not preach his religion openly. His philosophical views did harm to his reputation as early as in his youth

¹⁴ F. Masai, op. cit., 208-225. Z. Kuksewicz, *Zarys filozofii średniowiecznej. Filozofia bizantyńska, krajów zakaukaskich, słowiańska, arabska i żydowska*, [An Outline of Medieval Philosophy. Byzantine, Georgian, Slavonic, Arabic and Jewish Philosophy] Warszawa 1982, 237.

¹⁵ M. Jugie, *La polémique de Georgios Scholarios contre Pléthon, Byzantion*, 10 (1935), 524; Cf.: *Le manuscrits de Julien et le mouvement neo-païen à Mistra: Demetrius Rhallis et Gemiste Pléthon*, Byzantion, 5 (1929), 730-736; S. Runciman, *Ostatni renesans bizantyński* [The Last Byzantine Renaissance], trans. by J. Marzęcki, Warszawa 1973, 89.

in Constantinople. The Emperor had to send the philosopher away from the capital. Indiscretion on the part of disciples is to be blamed for that. Gemistos enjoyed more freedom in Mistra, whose political and economic independence was conducive to the development of his doctrine. He was, however, more cautious. Even though he had many disciples, few of them were familiar with essence of his views. It was a real intellectual conspiracy¹⁶. We only know few names of its members. We cannot even state whether the most renowned disciple of his, Bessarion, who listened to the master's lectures in 1431-1436, was initiated into all secrets¹⁷. The fact, that one of Gemistos' disciples expresses his grief at not being admitted into the sect proves that only a narrow group of his listeners could boast their knowledge of Gemistos' doctrine¹⁸.

At the same time Plethon manifested his Orthodox attitude in Florence in 1439. He had gone there as a member of the delegation with the view to signing the Union with Rome. During the session of the Council he criticized the "Filioque" formula of the Latins. Accompanied by Despot Demetrios, he left earlier and avoided signing the Union which he was not willing to accept¹⁹. How does this attitude relate to his philosophy and religion, which he had outlined in front of Cosimo de Medici and Italian intellectuals²⁰? During the meeting described by George

¹⁶ F. Masai, *op. cit.*, 300.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 309.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 300, note 2. The new book on Plethon by Woodhouse widens Gemistos' secret circle to a small extent. The author searches for the participants among the Peloponnesian aristocracy and even the monks. Woodhouse reaches the conclusion that only three of Plethon's disciples could be identified with absolute certainty i.e.: Marc Eugenicus, Bessarion and Chalkokondyles. They listened to Gemistos' philosophy rather than his religious views. Cf. C. M. Woodhouse, *op. cit.*, 32-33.

¹⁹ I. P. Medvedev, *op. cit.*, 76-77.

²⁰ J. W. Taylor, *op. cit.*, 20.

of Trebizond, he expounded his religious system and expressed the hope of his posthumous triumph²¹. He was, therefore, aware that he could not propagate his opinions in Byzantium officially during his lifetime.

This double aspect of Plethon led to discussions. His participation in the Council and Orthodox attitude should not be overrated. With a typical Greek astuteness Plethon put on protective colouring so as not to aggravate his dealings with the clergy whom he accompanied on the expedition to Italy. It is interesting whether or not he wore the same protective colouring in his relations with the imperial family? To what extent were they familiar with Plethon's religious views? Manuel, a philosophically minded Emperor favoured the master and was fully conscious of his liking for Plato and neoplatonists. Gemistos preferences were quite obvious in memorials calling for the reforms of state. Theodore II acceded to power in Mistra in his boyhood. Accordingly, Plethon always enjoyed an enormous advantage of age over Theodore and his brothers. In a memorial to Theodore, a fifty five year old man addressed a twenty year Despot. Plethon played the role of an aged master to them. He was their trustworthy councillor. Did they share all his thoughts? Were they awake to the fact that Gemistos' teaching flew in the face of the official state religion? Theodore II's wife, Cleope Malatesta died in 1433, and Plethon who had a funeral speech, emphasized the fact, that she had embraced the Greek faith, and praised her for abiding by the principles of Orthodox religion²². Yet, it is known that Theodore had originally granted his wife the freedom of Roman Catholic worship but he did not keep his promise and made her accept Orthodoxy. These facts cast more light on Plethon's stand in the court; he acted on behalf of the official religion. We have no data which

²¹ I. P. Medvedev, op. cit., 78.

²² Georgii Gemisti in *Dominam Cleopem Divinissimi Principis nostri uxorem oratio funebris*, PG. vol. 160, col. 940-952.

could prove that he attempted to win Cleope or the Despot himself for his religious projects. The independence he achieved was not full enough for him to voice his views openly. What bears out this assumption is the fact that he did not dare to have his work *On the Laws* propagated. After his death this book happened to be read by Despot Demetrios. Revolted at the content, the Despot sent the text to the patriarch Gennadios who ordered to destroy it²³. Hence, only few fragments were handed down to us; 85 chapters out of 101 were devoured by the flames. Was Demetrios astonished at the content of the manuscript? Could his reaction mean that he did not know Gemistos' religious views? The fact remains that Demetrios was loyal to Orthodoxy, opposed to the Union and willing to recognize the Turkish rule, which he did, joining the sultan's court after the fall of Morea in 1460. When two Despots: Thomas and Demetrios quarrelled in their rivalry for Peloponnese, Plethon seemed to back up the latter. Thomas could not possibly secure his support because of his admiration for the Latin world. It is obvious, however, that Gemistos did not disclose the secrets of his doctrine in front of Demetrios. Accordingly, he did not provoke ideological discussions within the imperial family. It seems that he was accepted as a philosopher commenting on the ancient systems, even controversial platonism, yet he could not reveal his religious convictions in front of his protectors.

Plethon's views did not provoke any response in Byzantium. His political proposals met with complete indifference on the part of Despots and Emperors who were not eager to introduce any changes in spite of the fact, that some ideas for example, a kind of mercantilism were quite reasonable, though behind time. Kept in secret, the project of instituting a new religion was circulated among very few people. Plethon's pagan attitude was accepted by the chosen élite, educated in the atmosphere of ancient tradition, in spite of the ruling Orthodox religion. Plethon did not find followers among his listeners. Even Bessarion who was really outstanding and intellectually independent did not go that

²³ M. Jugie, op. cit., 524-525.

far in his conception. He resorted to a compromise, attempting to fuse the elements of Platonism and Aristotelism, so as not to defy Orthodoxy which drew on Aristotle's thoughts²⁴.

Also, the works of Byzantine historians who give an account of contemporary times, namely the chronicles of Sphrantzes, Chalkokondyles and Doukas²⁵ do not point to Plethon's crucial role. They do not mention his name in either positive or negative context. They do not record his defence of Orthodoxy at the Council of Florence. Neither do they reveal his pagan views. Only Doukas writes about Plethon's participation in the Council delegation²⁶. The latter two do not even touch upon it. Spanning the period of ninety years Gemistos Plethon's life did not leave any trace on history written down by the three chroniclers. It is even striking in view of the fact that both Sphrantzes and Chalkokondyles knew Plethon personally. Sphrantzes, Constantine XI's friend had been at the court of Mistra during Constantine's reign as a Despot, and became the governor of Mistra in 1446. Chalkokondyles was even closer to the master as about 1445 he became his disciple in Mistra²⁷.

Although Plethon's philosophy had an impact upon the intellectuals, his paganism did not attract any followers. Even if historians discover the names of some other participants of the

²⁴ Z. Kuksewicz, op. cit., 225-226.

²⁵ *Annales Georgii Phrantzae*, ed. I. Bekker, Bonnae 1838; *Laonici Chalcocondylae De origine ac rebus gestis Turcorum*, ed. I. Bekker, Bonnae 1843; *Ducaea, Michaelis Ducaea Nepotis Historia Byzantina*, Bonnae 1834.

²⁶ *Ducas*, 214, 1.

²⁷ O. Jurewicz, *Historia literatury bizantyńskiej [History of Byzantine Literature]*, Warszawa 1984, 274, 276-277. Cyriac of Ancona remarks that he met Chalkokondyles the most brilliant disciple of Plethon, at the court of Mistra in 1447. Cf: H. Hunger, *Die Hochsprachliche Profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, vol. 1, München 1978, 485.

religious conspiracy, it will not provide an image of the movement which had a considerable impact upon the élite which could endanger Orthodoxy. A question arises whether it is possible to fullfill the tenet once expressed by C. Mango that *much more investigation is yet needed before we can appraise the meaning of these phenomena*²⁸ (i.e. Hellenism and its interpretation by Plethon). The latest book on Gemistos by Woodhouse showed that, similarly as his predecessors, the author could not overcome the barrier imposed by the shortage of information.

Besides, Plethon's system was by no means capable of rescuing the Empire. According to Medvedev's exaggerated comment, Byzantium needed its Joan of Arc not Gemistos²⁹. George of Trebizond's assertion that Plethon wanted to convert the whole mankind to paganism was an overstatement³⁰. There was nothing to be afraid of. It is true that when people felt threatened, they pinned their hopes on Orthodox religion rather than Hellenic system. Nicol says that in that epoch Plethon was *an odd man out*³¹, a person whose views could not be accepted because they were not realistic. A question is whether at any time in the history of mediaeval Byzantium paganism could affect the ideology of state and society inseparably bound to Orthodox religion. Plethon's Platonism aroused some interest in the West. Influenced by his views, Cosimo di Medici founded a Platonic Academy in Florence³². Marsilio Ficino, a philosopher, used to light a lamp in front of Plato's bust in the Florentine Grove of Academos. So,

²⁸ C. Mango, *Byzantinism and Romantic Hellenism*, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, XXVIII (1965), 33 = Idem, *Byzantium and Its Image*, Variorum Reprints, London 1984.

²⁹ I. P. Medvedev, *Mistra*, Leningrad 1973, 113.

³⁰ C. M. Woodhouse, *op. cit.*, 273.

³¹ D. M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium 1261-1453*, London 1973, 362.

³² On Renaissance Platonism Cf: B. Kieszkowski, *Platonizm re-*

much for the response of the West³³. In his native country, however, Plethon did not play the role of a prophet. For the West, the revival of ancient standards meant freedom from the stiff rules of Catholic ideology. For the East, a departure from Orthodoxy would have been tantamount to the loss or serious weakening of national identity. The Greeks, however attached to ancient traditions, could never agree to it. Plethon's Hellenism was bound to fail in Byzantium. The progressiveness of the last Emperors and Despots, and Plethon's cautiousness contributed to the fact that he did not have to recant his views, unlike Psellos who had done it in the eleventh century.

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nesansowy [*The Renaissance Platonism*], Warszawa 1935. C.M. Woodhouse (op. cit., 364) claims that Plethon's Platonism was skin-deep in Italy. Only a small group of Greek emigrants retained the memory of his philosophy.

³³ H.-G. Beck, *Das literarische Schaffen der Byzantiner*, Wien 1974, 16.