

Sacerdotium and Regnum in Late Byzantium: Some Notes on the “Imperial Deesis”

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to provide information from the field of art concerning the Church’s power over the late Byzantine state and society. This is based on the unequivocal fact that art works were always an appropriate source of information about the social, religious and political developments. So, in the introductory chapter a number of literary sources are submitted testifying that important political and religious events were destined to change the balance of power in Byzantium from the second half of the 13th century onwards. In the main chapter the iconographic subject of the “Imperial Deesis”, emerged in the 14th century, is looked at from all sides. This is due to the fact that this subject is more convenient than others in revealing the Church’s supremacy over the emperor. Given that every single one of the Orthodox Bishops constitute a vicar of Christ on earth as, it can be said that the portrait of Christ as High Priest and King of all Kings is indicative of the double role of the Church in Late Byzantium, religious and political.

Keywords: Byzantine Art, Byzantine Church, Imperial Deesis, Hesychasm, Christ-High Priest

1. Introduction

According to historian Nikephoros Gregoras, Patriarch Athanasius I (1289-1293, 1303-1309) - a key person in establishing of an ecclesiastical policy emancipated from the Emperor’s one - abdicated from the throne of Constantinople because of a malicious deed: [...] *While he [Patriarch Athanasius] still held patriarchal office and resided mainly in the kellia around Xerolophos, his footstool was stolen from the patriarchal throne and on this the divine icon of Christ our Saviour was etched, with the Emperor Andronicus on one side with a bridle in his mouth and the Patriarch Athanasius on the other holding the reins, like a charioteer being drawn by a horse* (VII. 9C) [15].

Regardless of whether Athanasius’ abdication was due to this incident or not, this vulgar joke, combined with his choice as Patriarch, provides the first indication of the Emperor’s replacement by the Patriarch as the supreme authority in the minds of the ecclesiastical community. From now on a lot of important events were destined to change the balance of power in practice such as the state shrinkage and the divisions associated with political opportunism, the feeling of a threatened extinction, the economic woes, related with the «dark» role of foreign traders and bankers and,

eventually, the cruel religious disputes [7]. Under these circumstances which were to result in centrifugal tendencies the monarch’s authority increasingly diminished while, on the other hand, the Church became more powerful and ultimately replaced the secular ruler at many levels of authority. Besides, the ecclesiastical policy of Andronicus II Paleologos (1282-1328) to strengthen the authority of the Church, turning the Patriarchate of Constantinople into a hub of political and social life [1].

It is no accident that the first official written declaration of submission by an Orthodox emperor to the patriarch of Constantinople was made in the year 1303, when Athanasius resumed his duties as Patriarch. The address that was written in 1310 on the occasion of the ending of the Arsenite schism is also indicative of this new view: [...] *The emperor was obedient to the patriarch and did everything in conformity with his opinion, while he followed his wishes completely and, indeed, ceded power to the church and submitted himself to it* [12]. Two years later, during the patriarchate of Nephon I, Andronicus ceded to the Patriarch the rights over Mount Athos that had traditionally been held by the emperor [10]. It was an act of recognition as the Holy Mountain was going to be one of the most unifying factors for the Orthodox world after the disintegration of Byzantium and the Balkan

kingdoms.

From then on the Patriarchs were to intervene in and shape political developments, both within and outside the Byzantine dominions. A characteristic case is that of John XIV Calecas (1334-1347). He served as regent from 1341 and governor of Constantinople with increased powers, during the campaigns of Andronicus III. According to Gregoras, the Patriarch protested that [...] *What the soul is to the body, the Church is to the imperial throne; both are one in terms of their constitution and life* (XII.3, 579) [15]. Moreover Calecas made Gregoras wild, when he dressed himself in imperial insignia. Yet, the Patriarch bothered the people of Constantinople by wearing a gold *kalyptra* on his head during the coronation of John V Paleologos. It is worth noting that in this head-dress had been embroidered the figures of Christ, of the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist, i.e. the theme of the Deesis. It can be supposed that Calecas' *kalyptra* would be similar to the crown worn by the archbishop St. Sava Nemanja portrayed in the doorway of the Holy Apostles' naos, Peć (middle of the 14th c.) (figure 1)



Figure 1. Peć. Church of Holy Apostles. St. Sava Nemanja.

St. Sava's crown is adorned with three medallions. Christ's bust appears in the central one. Angels are painted in the two others medallions supplicating Christ. By the way, it should be observed that St. Sava - labeled as Patriarch, not as archbishop - is dressed in patriarchal attire holding a big cross in the form of a gemmed scepter and also, with the other hand, a mandylion which refers to the emperor's

akakia.

The tendency on the part of the Church's leaders to assume political powers was to grow stronger after the establishment of the hesychastic theology of Gregory Palamas, archbishop of Thessaloniki and an emblematic figure of the 14th century. This theology would lead to the further growth and dominance of monasticism in social and political life as well as to the further consolidation of the privileges and the supremacy of the Great Church, though Hesychasm betrayed a charismatic, not bureaucratic or institutional, conception of the religious authority. As T. Papamastorakis has already indicated [13], the Palamas' pupils, as Patriarchs, would not hesitate to establish their authority in terms that were somewhat contrary to the tradition of *synallelia* and the collective responsibility of the Church.

The patriarch Philotheos Kokkinos (1353-1355, 1364-1376), in a letter he wrote to the princes of Russia in 1370, claimed that God had appointed him as leader of the Orthodox world, as guardian and advisor to all the souls under his jurisdiction: [...] *All those who are dependent on me*. In his view, the Emperor was no longer the head of the Orthodox Christian world, but the occupant of the patriarchal throne of Constantinople [8]. Patriarch Antonius IV (1389-1390, 1391-1397) addressed in 1393 a letter to Basil I, Grand Prince of Moscow: *It is not possible for Christians to have an Ekklēsia and not have an emperor (= basileia), because empire and Church have a great unity and commonality, it is impossible for them to be separated from one another* [9]. As it is known the Prince of Moscow had declared that they [Russians] had a Church [that of Constantinople] but no Emperor, indicating the supremacy of the Church's power compared to Emperor's one. But, according to Antonius, there was no distinction of powers: the Church and the political power were one and the same. The Emperor anointed by God is not simply a secular leader but the sovereign of the Christian universe. And yet, these lines have been written when Constantinople was in a state of decline i.e. during the reign of Manuel II Paleologos, a vassal of the sultan Bayazid I. Of course it could not but be indicated of an anachronism: the byzantine conception of the emperor's ecumenical authority was in force in the end of the 14th century, even in theory.

Eventually it is worthy to be mentioned that the replacement by the Patriarch of the secular ruler at many levels of authority should be reached in a crucial point during the reign of John V Palaiologos, as he convoked a synod in 1380-1382 in order to specify the emperor's competence in the affairs of the Church. The patriarch Neilos (1380-1388) and the synod drew up a deed in nine articles. However, these articles concern administrative matters. The sacral aspects of the imperial office are absent as well as the vital imperial privileges, i.e. the right to convoke an ecumenical council and the right to appoint the ecumenical patriarch, though these two rights could be taken for granted. In any case the deed in question had no crucial role in the following years. What it indicates is simply the fact of the confusion of the two administrative powers in late Byzantium as for the

bounds of their authority.

2. The Theme of the “Imperial Deesis”

No wonder that the increasing power of the Church and its political role in the late Byzantine era came to be expressed through art. A number of iconographic programs demonstrate an intention of glorifying the Church ministrants' supremacy such as that in the cross of Michael Cerularius (1057/8) long before the Palaeologan era. Yet, a series of iconographic themes emerged during the 14th century are of eschatological-triumphal character closely connected with the conception of the Davidic descent of Christ and, by extension, with His kingly status. One of them is of a vital significance: The iconographic subject of the “Imperial Deesis”.

An extensive Imperial Deesis stands in the narthex of the catholicon of the Treskavac manastir, Prilep (1334/35) [6]. Christ dressed only in imperial attire, such as loros and mitra, is situated in a medallion on the top of the dome. A huge throne surrounded by angels with a codex (evangel) over it is depicted in the lower zone. The Virgin Mary, also in royal attire, is represented on the right side of the throne bowing her head in reverence and extending her hands for mercy before Christ. King David is painted on the opposite side of the throne. Ranks of angels laid in the south part of the zone. Standing Saints and Martyrs are situated beneath the cupola.

It is the first time that the subject in question is met with its component parts fully developed. The Virgin and David are not the sole participants in this praxis of supplication but also the celestial powers, i.e. the celestial Ecclesia, and the delegates of the earthly Ecclesia, that is the Saints. The completeness of the mentioned Imperial Deesis points out that it was probably formed at the beginning of the 14th century, in the years of patriarch Athanasios I.

A rare version of the same subject is represented on the pediment of the east wall of the church of St. Nicolaos *tou Tzotza*, Kastoria (1360-1380) [16]. Christ-Emperor and God the Father (= the Eldest of the Days), who bears the Holy Spirit in his right arm, are seated together on a luxurious throne. They are featured against a huge mandorla, flanked by the celestial forces and also by the Virgin, clothed in royal garments, and by John the Baptist. Both, Virgin Mary and John beseech the Holy Trinity for mercy. God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are hallowed by a nimbus and labeled by the inscription *Ι(ησοῦ)ς Χ(ριστός)* [Jesus Christ]. Another accompanying inscription reads: *Ὁ βασιλεύς τῶν βασιλευόντων* [The Great King of all Kings]. In the open codex held by Christ-Emperor is included a quotation from Bible: *Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world* (Mat. 25, 34). The composition is completed by the figures of the prophets David and Daniel, which are set in the corners of the triangular frame of the picture. David carries out a scroll with a quotation from the Psalm 44(45). On the other hand Daniel's scroll bears a citation of his book (Dan. 7, 9-14).

This picture is stretched out on the top of the east wall of

this single-ailed church, i.e. on the most distinguished part of it, since the subject concerns the glory and power of the Holy Trinity in Heaven and on earth. I highlight the fact that the majesty of the Holy Trinity is realized in the person of Christ-Emperor who is also the officiated lamb for mankind's sake.

The subject of the Imperial Deesis is also illustrated on the side wall of the church of St. Athanasios *tou Mouzaki*, Kastoria (1374-1386) and in the low zone of the north wall of the Markov Manastir's catholicon, near Skopje, dedicated to St. Demetrius (1376/7 ἢ 1380/1) (figure 2) [2]. In the last case the Christ-Emperor is enthroned upon the celestial powers. Two angels, whose hands are outstretched in a gesture of supplication, flank Christ. He is also flanked by the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist and also by the prophet David and a series of others Saints dressed in princely attire. Given that the iconographical program of the Markov Manastir' catholicon is full of liturgical and political meanings, the appearance of the Christ-Emperor accompanied by the members of His sacred retinue. sends to the spectator a multi-layered symbolic message. The enthroned Christ-King located near the prothesis gate is evidence of the symbolism of the Great Entrance. He is the King of all Kings who, accompanied by the celestial court and his saints, approaches the altar to be slaughtered for faithful's salvation. By the way, it is worthy to be reminded that if the emperor of Constantinople was present at the Liturgy, he would meet the procession in the center of the nave accompanied by his entire retinue. Yet, the subject of the Great Entrance is illustrated within the entire Bema with Christ-High Priest portrayed on the altar conch. This double annotation of the Great Entrance with Christ as Emperor and High Priest at once constitutes, among others topics, a mention to the Bishop authority.



Figure 2. Skopje. Markov Manastir. Catholicon. Christ of the Imperial Deesis.

The Imperial Deesis is also illustrated in the folio 58v of the Serbian Psalter in Munich (end of 14th c.), which was believed to have been produced in the region of Skopje, in the church of Saint Three, Kastoria (1401), in the church of the Ascension, Lescoec (1461/2) and in the old catholicon of the Great Meteoron, Thessaly (1483/4) [5]. In the last case the enthroned Christ-Emperor is surrounded by the inscription *Ο βασιλεὺς τῶν βασιλευόντων καὶ κριτὴς δίκαιος* [The King of all Kings and the Righteous Judge].

There is no consensus among the scientists about the literary sources or the symbolic meaning of the Imperial Deesis' theme. On the other hand the connection with Gregory Palamas' theology is not fully documented. But, whatever it may be, what is worthy to be quoted is that the triumphal content of the subject is defined by the double notion of Christ's power: He is the slaughtered King of all Kings for mankind's sake and also the great Judge of it. This theological meaning is met throughout the Liturgy but mainly in the Holy Saturday's one. The triumphal conception of Christ's Passion imbues the mentioned liturgical texts, especially the Cherubim Chant sung on Holy Saturday's Great Entrance. Besides, in the late Byzantine period the interpretation of the procession of the Great Entrance and the deposition of the Gifts became the axis around which the symbolic structure of the Liturgy turned. Furthermore, the Service and the Liturgy of Holy Saturday has been considered to be influential in forming the byzantine iconography during the 14th century. Indeed, the inscription *Βασιλεὺς τῶν Βασιλευόντων* met in the wall paintings came possibly from the Cherubim hymn of the Holy Saturday's procession.

However, there is one further point to be considered: The subject of the Imperial Deesis should be perceived within the context of two historical data which strengthened the power of the Church leaders in the late Byzantine period: First the subject's appearance in the years of second civil war in Byzantium (1341-1347). Second the subject's spreading mainly in the lands set under the jurisdiction of the archbishopric of Ohrid.

As having already noticed, the iconographic theme of the Imperial Deesis constitutes a product of a trend of the delegates of the Church for usurpation of the secular power. It is well known that the lands of the archbishopric of Ohrid and those of Macedonia were found under political and administrative instability from the end of the 12th century and of course in the second half of the 14th century that is to say in the period of the decay of the Serbian and Bulgarian states. Macedonia and, in general, the lands of the central Balkans were under continuous territorial claim by all sides, Byzantines, Serbs, Bulgarians and Ottomans. So it is nothing to be surprised about the appearance of the Imperial Deesis in this period since these circumstances were going to be decisive for the establishment of a theme which testifies the gap of a strong central authority and also the shift of power balance on behalf of the Church.

All this is confirmed not only by archbishop's portraits such as that of St. Sava's in Peć, where he stands holding imperial insignia in a sense, but also by an important development in

the iconography of the subject in the last decades of the 14th century i.e. a variation of it, in which Christ is dressed not only in imperial attire but also in prelatice one.

The double status of Christ is represented in the monastery of the Transfiguration at Kovalevo, near Novgorod (1380) [4]. As in other cases, here too an Imperial Deesis is depicted. The enthroned Christ is dressed in imperial and prelatice attire and insignia at once. The Virgin Mary, also clothed in imperial garments, stands at the side of Christ in a posture of supplication.

It is important to mention that while the subject of the Imperial Deesis, with Christ dressed in imperial and prelatice garments, were going to be located in murals of the region of Ohrid and North-West Macedonia from the 15th century onwards, the figure of Christ-High Priest and King of all Kings were going to be spread mostly in Greek lands and islands. What are the reasons for this phenomenon?

First of all, it is beyond doubt that the conception of Christ as King and High Priest has been based upon the Jewish traditions, which were always in force in Byzantium. Yet, the figure of Christ as both Priest and King should be attributed to the prestige of the throne of Constantinople, which had been increased as a result of the reaction to the pro-Western policy of Michael VIII Paleologos, according to T. Papamastorakis [13]. The subject clearly implies the union of the two powers, the secular-political and sacred-religious, in the head of the Church.

As for the question why the subject of Christ-High Priest and King of all Kings, especially as an isolated figure, is appeared just before or right after the fall of Constantinople, the answer should be sought in the political-social conditions and the ideological tendencies of this period, which led to the weakening of the Emperor's authority compared with that of the Church's leaders. Indeed, Simeon archbishop of Thessaloniki (†1429) has pointed out that the Bishop replaces Christ, as High Priest as well as Great King on earth, provided Christ has already established both the devout Kingship and Prelacy. Evidently, these two powers are strong connected in every single Bishop by God's grace. In addition, the historical circumstances of the late Byzantine and early Ottoman periods were to further impel the Orthodox Church towards a process of centralisation, the protection of its identity and also the adoption of political ideas and activities. In this, the absence of a Christian political leadership after the Fall of Constantinople, combined with the gathering of the Orthodox community around the figure of the Patriarch, was to confer a political role on the Church's ruling class. The occupant of the throne of Constantinople became an important state figure with multiple powers, a fact that was borne out by his subsequent civic, political and diplomatic activities. Therefore the figure of Christ-High Priest and King of all Kings was to be suggestive of the new role of the Patriarch under the ottoman rule.

3. Conclusion

The preceding analysis showed that a number of literary

sources testify the political and religious events were destined to change the balance of power in Byzantium from the second half of the 13th century onwards. Under these events, which were to result in centrifugal tendencies, the emperor's authority increasingly diminished while, on the other hand, the Church became more powerful and ultimately replaced the secular ruler at many levels of authority. Moreover, the religious art was instrumental in forming the political role of the Byzantine Church during the years of the civil wars, the vulgar Hesychastic controversy and, finally, the ottoman invasion in Balkans. In particular the iconographic subject of the "Imperial Deesis" and its meaningful variations emerged under these circumstances and flourished before and after the Fall of Constantinople (1453) give strong evidence for the Church's supremacy over the secular ruler. Yet, although the figure of Christ-High Priest and King of all Kings is of a liturgical character is also suggestive not only of the absence of a Christian political leadership but also of the union of the two powers in the head of the Orthodox Church, i.e. the Patriarch of Constantinople.

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