The fall of Constantinople to the crusaders in 1204 had far-reaching results. The event itself, the subsequent looting of Constantinople, and the years of Latin occupation remained a powerful memory for a very long time, and doomed from the start any efforts either for cooperation between Byzantines and western Europeans or for union of the Orthodox and Catholic churches. Moreover, the Fourth Crusade resulted in the fragmentation of the political space that had been the Byzantine Empire. The weak and short-lived Latin Empire of Constantinople was but one of the successor states. There were three Greek ones: the Empire of Nicaea and the Empire of Trebizond in Asia Minor, and the Despotate of Epiros. The Venetians acquired part of Constantinople, the ports of Modon and Coron, Crete in 1211, and conquered Euboea and a number of other Aegean islands. In the Peloponnese, the Principality of Achaia soon emerged as the strongest of the Frankish possessions. In the Balkans, the separatist tendencies of the Bulgarians led to the coronation of Kalojan, while Serbia had become independent some years earlier, and Stephen the First-Crowned was given the royal title by Pope Honorius III in 1217.

The fragmentation had begun before the fall of Constantinople, as both Greek and Italian lords took over small areas in Greece, in Asia Minor, and in the Ionian islands, as well as Rhodes and Cyprus (Oikonomides 1976b: 13–28). However, the Fourth Crusade greatly accelerated separatist trends, as well as adding new states.
Map 7 The Byzantine Empire in 1204
As a result, and despite eventual Byzantine reconquests, the political space remained fragmented until the Ottomans united it once again, in the fifteenth century. In the late thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries, the Venetians and the Genoese brought to the area economic unity, under their own control and in order to serve their own interests.

The recovery of Constantinople soon became the overt and acknowledged policy of three of the successor states: the Despotate of Epiros, the Empire of Nicaea, and the Bulgarian state, especially under John II Asen (1218–41). In the meantime, both of the Greek states acquired state structures and institutions. The best-known are those of the Empire of Nicaea and the Despotate of Epiros.

**The Empire of Nicaea**

Into Nicaea, as well as, to a lesser degree, into Epiros, had fled a number of aristocrats as well as the church hierarchy and the intellectuals. The new state had, first of all, a problem of legitimacy. This was solved in 1206, when Theodore Laskaris, son-in-law of Alexios III Angelos, was proclaimed emperor in Nicaea, Alexios having been captured and deposed by Boniface of Montferrat. Two years later a patriarch was installed, and he could now crown Theodore emperor.

Theodore I Laskaris and his successors were able to establish in Nicaea a central administration of a form sometimes described as a ‘household government’ (Angold 1975: 3). The emperors, good and successful soldiers, governed together with the aristocracy, to whom lands and estates were granted. The Nicene army, consisting of both native and mercenary troops (including westerners) was both well organized and efficient. John III Doukas Vatatzes (1222–54) also created along his eastern frontiers a defence system consisting of local recruits who paid no taxes but had military obligations (Angold 1975: 194–5).

John III Vatatzes was a particularly successful emperor. His reign saw victories against the Latin Empire and the Turkish Sultanate of Iconium, which also suffered greatly from the invasion of the Mongols (1242). The emperor’s international status was enhanced by his friendly relations with Frederick II the Great, and his marriage to Frederick’s daughter Constance. John Vatatzes is also remembered for his economic policies, which were based on the idea that the state should be self-sufficient. He discouraged imports. His own estates were models of management, and he gave lands to monasteries along with the wherewithal to make them productive. Western Asia Minor was a rich land, the population was increasing, and the eastern Mediterranean was still on an upward economic curve (Laiou 2002). The emperor’s policies, which encouraged investment in agricultural production, rode on this
positive economic conjuncture, and were successful; Nicaea was even able to export grain to Seljuk Asia Minor, then suffering from famine.

In the race for the conquest of Constantinople, the early favourite was the Despotate of Epiros, whose closest rival was originally the Bulgarian state and eventually the Empire of Nicaea. The first major objective was Thessalonike, which Theodore Doukas took in 1224; he was crowned emperor three years later. The conflict with Bulgaria ended with Theodore's defeat and capture at the battle of Klokotnitsa (1230). Thessalonike surrendered to John Vatatzes in 1246, receiving in return privileges that confirmed its freedoms, customs, and rights. The conquest of Constantinople was close, but would not be realized by Vatatzes.

His son and successor, Theodore II Laskaris (1254–8), mistrusted the aristocracy. In order to counter the power of the great families, he continued his father’s policy of creating a body of administrators from lower social strata, who owed their allegiance only to the emperor—a body of King's men. The policy could not be sustained after his death. He had tried to safeguard the succession of his 9-year-old son, John IV Laskaris, by appointing as regent the most important of the King’s men, George Mouzalon, and exacting oaths of loyalty from the clergy, the senate, the army, and the people. Soon thereafter, a revolt of the aristocracy erupted; George Mouzalon and his brother were murdered, while Michael Palaiologos, the major representative of the aristocracy, was proclaimed regent and then, on 1 January 1259, co-emperor. An oath with important constitutional implications, sworn by both Michael and John IV at the insistence of the patriarch Arsenios, imposed upon the people the duty of rising up in arms against whichever emperor tried to unseat the other (Laiou 1995: 102–5). Despite Arsenios’ efforts to preserve the rights of the last Laskarid, Michael VIII was to blind and imprison the young boy (December 1261). The Laskarid dynasty was replaced by the Palaiologoi, who ruled until 1453.

The triumph of the Palaiologoi was made possible by a major achievement of the co-emperor Michael: on 25 July 1261, a small expeditionary force took Constantinople back from its Latin masters. The event itself was virtually fortuitous, but for some years the emperors of Nicaea and Michael himself had prepared the way by successful wars against the Prince of Achaia and the splinter Greek states, and by treaties with the Seljuks, the Mongols, the Bulgarians, and, in 1261, the Genoese (Nicol 1993: 30–7). There was great rejoicing at the reconquest of Constantinople, and Michael VIII proclaimed himself to be the 'New Constantine'. He began a programme of rebuilding and restoring the city after the neglect of the Latin emperors. But in Asia Minor, when the protasekretis Kakos ('the Bad') Senachereim heard of the recovery of the ancient capital, he proclaimed in dismay: 'What sins have we committed, that we should live to see such misfortunes? Let no one harbor any hopes, now that the Romans hold the City again' (Pachym., vol. 1: 205).
Map 8 The Byzantine Empire in the second half of the 14th century
The long history of the restored empire may be divided into two parts, from 1261 to 1354, and from 1354 to 1453. General conditions and the problems facing the state, as well as the policies of the emperors differed significantly in these two periods.

Some traits, nevertheless, characterize the entire period, from 1261 to 1453. The Byzantine Empire never recovered all of the territories it had held before 1204, not even in Greece and the Balkans. It was a small state with reduced finances and armed forces. In its immediate neighbourhood other states, Serbia and Bulgaria, waxed and waned, posing significant threats. Western Europe as a whole was much more powerful than it had been in the early thirteenth century, both economically and politically, certainly so until the time of the Black Death. Even though the Hundred Years War (1337–1453) would embroil France and England in a long struggle, there were intervals in the fighting, and western European states had to be taken very seriously indeed by the Byzantine Empire. The royal house of France posed a particularly acute danger until 1311. Other western powers, primarily Catalonia and Aragon, were soon to acquire an interest in the eastern Mediterranean. At the same time, the Venetians and the Genoese were struggling for commercial supremacy in Byzantine waters; armed with the privileges granted them by the emperors, they were to achieve an informal and unstated division of areas of influence and control by the early part of the fourteenth century (Laiou 1980–1: 177–222). In the east, the Turks (first the Seljuks, then the Ottomans) were a major and eventually fatal threat, while the Mongols, the Golden Horde in the north, the state of the Ilkhanids in the east, were significant newcomers. Finally, one of the Greek successor states, the Empire of Trebizond, remained independent. Thus the Byzantine Empire not only had to face enemies on three fronts, but these enemies were often powerful, and, since they were also numerous, careful and delicate diplomacy was essential; it proved generally successful for a long time (Oikonomides 1992: 73–88).

The policies of the first Palaiologoi until the death of Andronikos III in 1341 may be summarized as follows. First, perhaps, came what may be termed as the gathering of territories, the effort to recover the Greek lands that had been occupied by splinter states after 1204. A second imperative, which took pride of place during the reign of Michael VIII, was to forestall attacks from western Europe aimed at the reinstitution of a Latin Empire (Geanakoplos 1959). The emperors also had to deal with the ambitions of Venice and Genoa, and with those of Serbia and Bulgaria. All of these imperatives required an orientation of interest and policy on the western provinces of the empire, on the Balkans, and on western Europe. The recovery of Constantinople in 1261 had embroiled the Byzantines heavily with the West, a policy which ultimately contributed to the fall of Asia Minor. Michael VIII
neglected the province, until it was too late to save it from the Turks. Hence the report of the statement of Kakos Senachereim by the major historian of the times, George Pachymeres, for whom the fate of Asia Minor was a matter of supreme interest.

Michael VIII Palaiologos was a soldier and diplomat of no mean talent. During his reign, the Byzantine Empire became a major player in the field of international relations for the last time, since the resources and possibilities of his successors were much reduced. Michael fought against the Principality of Achaia, recovering Mistra and Monemvasia, which was to become a major commercial city; he fought against the Venetians in the Aegean, with mixed results; he recovered the cities of the Bulgarian coast with their Greek-speaking population and their commercial importance as outlets of Black Sea grain. He made alliance both with Hulagu, leader of the Ilkhanids of Persia, against the sultanate of Iconium, and with the Mongols of the Golden Horde against the Bulgarian state; he also made an alliance with Baybars, the sultan of Egypt. His defensive policies were, in time-honoured Byzantine fashion, meant to use friends at the back of one’s enemy to help subdue the enemy, and were, on the whole, successful. His aggressive policies were aimed at the full restoration of the Byzantine Empire, and were only partially successful.

Michael VIII’s most important achievement was to save the empire from the very real threat of the restoration of Frankish rule, a threat embodied in the person of Charles of Anjou, brother to the sainted king of France, Louis IX. Charles had, at papal and French royal request, occupied Sicily after wresting it from Manfred, the illegitimate offspring of the _stupor mundi_, Frederick II. Byzantine historians thought that Charles of Anjou had the ambition of conquering the entire world (Greg., vol. 1: 123–4; Laiou 1972: 11–12). An exaggeration, to be sure; but he certainly intended to conquer the Byzantine state and Constantinople, and restore the Latin Empire, the heir to whose titular emperor (Philip, son of Baldwin II) had wed Charles’s daughter. The papacy and Venice were party to those ambitions. They were thwarted by Michael’s first major diplomatic move, the acceptance of the union of the Orthodox and Latin churches, the Union of Lyons, proclaimed on 6 July 1274. This removed temporarily the papal blessing on Charles’s plans, but caused a great movement of protest in Constantinople. Eventually, Martin IV, a French pope, restored the papal–Angevin alliance, claiming that the union was not being truly implemented. A major attack on the Byzantine Empire, planned for 1283, was forestalled by the Sicilian Vespers, a revolt of the population of Sicily against the Angevins, which broke out on 30 March 1282. The king of Aragon was called in, and the Aragonese displaced the Angevins as rulers of Naples and Sicily, thus ending the Angevin threat to Byzantium. Michael VIII was to claim that he had encouraged and supported the revolt, and this may well be true. The western claims to Constantinople were eventually taken up by Charles of Valois, husband of the titular empress of Constantinople, Catherine of Courtenay; the threat of a western invasion, acute once again in 1308, did not end until about 1311.
Michael VIII's diplomatic triumph had been bought at a very high price: the union of the two churches, on the papacy's terms. He was deeply hated for this by large segments of Byzantine society; his son, Andronikos II, repudiated the union. The matter was not seriously taken up again until the 1360s.

**Andronikos II and Andronikos III Palaiologoi (1282–1341)**

Michael's successors, his son Andronikos II (1282–1328) and his great-grandson Andronikos III (1328–41), reversed his policies to a considerable extent. Andronikos II still had to deal with western claims to Constantinople, and managed fairly well. But his energies were directed towards the Balkans, where the kingdoms of Bulgaria and Serbia, especially the latter, were becoming dangerous. They were also directed towards the reconquest of the territories of Epiros and Thessaly, and very much towards Asia Minor. The same may be said of Andronikos III. Personal campaigns of the sovereigns, as well as campaigns by important lieutenants, such as Alexios Philanthropenos in the early 1290s (Laiou 1978: 89–99), aimed at pushing back the Seljuks and strengthening the defences of Asia Minor. Some successes notwithstanding, the results were not satisfactory. Effective Byzantine power in southern Asia Minor ended in the late years of Michael VIII and the first years of his successor. In the north, the Ottoman emirate was bent on expansion, fuelled by the ideology of ghazi warriors and thus aimed, in the first instance, at the Byzantines. The defeat of Michael IX, Andronikos II's son and co-emperor, at Bapheus in 1302, was a major disaster. The important cities of Bithynia, stepping-stones to Europe, were conquered by the Ottomans: Brusa in 1326, Nicaea in 1331, and Nikomedeia in 1337. Andronikos III and John Kantakouzenos established alliances with the Seljuk emirs of Sarukhan and Aydin.

The other aim of the early Palaiologoi, the gathering of territories, was achieved only in part. The major successes were in Epiros, where the inhabitants of Ioannina acknowledged Byzantine sovereignty in 1319, although they broke their oath of fealty some years later, while the rest of the Despotate surrendered in 1340 (Nicol 1984: 82–122). Thessaly was acquired piecemeal by 1333. These acquisitions were short-lived, since both areas would pass into the hands of the Serbian king Stephen Dušan a short time later. In the Peloponnese, the Byzantine lands were organized into the Despotate of the Morea, with its capital in Mistra, after 1349.

Internally, the reign of the first two Palaiologoi is characterized by the contradictory and conflicting needs of a state that would be centralized and an aristocracy that would be, and was, powerful and received special and privileged treatment.
In some ways, this is a replay of twelfth-century politics, with the difference that the claims of the state were, in practice, much weaker. Nevertheless, the first two Palaiologoi exercised a heavy fiscality, levying a number of extraordinary taxes, and also claiming regalian rights which translated into monetary terms, rights that had not been exercised in the centuries of wealth and power, such as the tenth century, but which may date back to the late Komnenoi (Laiou 2000: 97–110). At the same time, however, all of the Palaiologoi granted tax privileges to the lay aristocracy and the church, both secular and monastic, especially the latter. There is a powerful contradiction here, which was not resolved until the second half of the century, when the prerogatives of the state were gravely diminished.

In economic terms, agriculture especially and trade to some extent did quite well into the 1340s (Laiou 2002). Byzantium was going through the same virtuous cycle as western Europe; a cycle which ended with the wars that prevailed after 1341 and the plague. In fiscal terms, however, the government’s resources diminished. A good deal of the surplus was appropriated by lay and ecclesiastical landlords, as the tax-paying peasants progressively turned into rent-paying tenants. Michael VIII could draw on the treasury of the Nicaean Empire for his very expensive foreign policy, but his successors had no such reserves. Extraordinary taxes could yield only so much, and a good deal was spent to pay off mercenaries, especially the Catalans. The coinage was devalued several times, but this in no way helped either the economy or the fisc.

The Byzantine army and navy were small, as befitted a small state. In 1285, on the pretext of the defeat of the plans of Charles of Anjou, Andronikos II dismantled the fleet, thus more than ever placing the empire into dependence on the Italian naval powers, Venice and Genoa. Subsequent efforts to rebuild the fleet were only partially successful. As for the army, it included both native troops and foreigners, whether allies or mercenaries. The native troops were composed in considerable part of pronoia-holders. The pronoia, an institution that dates to the time of the Komnenoi, was a temporary grant of lands and, primarily, their revenues, in return for service, especially military service. The pronoia-holders were not necessarily members of the aristocracy; indeed, many of them were no better off than the peasant-soldiers of the tenth century; but there were no more peasant-soldiers, and in this sense the pronoia-holders were a privileged group. The pronoia has considerable differences from the western fief: it was revocable, there was no subinfeudation and, until the very late period, there were no attendant rights of justice. As for mercenary troops, the most famous among them is the Catalan Company, invited by Andronikos II to help fight against the Turks in Bithynia; the mercenaries rebelled, and eventually set up the Catalan Duchy of Athens, in 1311.

Until 1341, the aristocracy was very powerful. A few great families had considerable estates and the revenues therefrom; their members were the army commanders and intermarried with people of lower yet still aristocratic families (such as Theodore Metochites and Nikephoros Choumnos) who held high administrative
office. Provincial aristocratic families held corresponding offices in the provinces; some were very wealthy. The period is marked by the increase in the power, political and economic, of the aristocracy, as well as that of the Church, which benefited from the donations of emperors, aristocrats, and peasants (Laiou 1973: 131–51).

**Civil War, 1341–54**

The major internal event of the fourteenth century was the second civil war, which lasted from 1341 to 1354. Earlier, a civil war had been fought between Andronikos II and his grandson, Andronikos III. It lasted intermittently for seven years (1321–8) and had perhaps been primarily an intra-aristocratic affair, with members of a younger generation trying to seize the crown from the old emperor. Yet it was also attended by the involvement (at the request of both parties) of the Serbians and the Bulgarians (Laiou 1972: 284–300). The second civil war, by contrast, was a much more complex affair. It, too, began as a struggle for the throne, between John Kantakouzenos, member of a great and wealthy family, and the regency for John V, the heir to the throne: John’s mother Anne of Savoy, the Patriarch John Kalekas, and the *megas doux* Alexios Apokaukos, a man who had become powerful in the administration. However, almost immediately the war acquired strong social aspects. Although all generalizations regarding this issue have exceptions, it holds generally true that John Kantakouzenos was backed by the landed aristocracy, while Apokaukos was backed by the merchants (quite a powerful group), the sailors, and the common people, especially in the cities. The social aspect of the civil war became more evident with the passage of time, particularly in Thessalonike which was ruled by the ‘Zealots’, a radical group whose ideology remains hidden under the obscuring veil of hostile sources; they seem to have been sailors and other people connected with the sea, including possibly some refugees, although their leaders bore aristocratic or upper-class names (such as Michael and Andrew Palaiologos). Some members of the aristocracy of Thessalonike were killed, while the rest fled the city, spreading the tale of the reversal of the natural order of social relations.

Eventually, John Kantakouzenos and the aristocracy won the battle, although they very much lost the war. The opposition collapsed in 1344 and 1345, Alexios Apokaukos was assassinated in 1345, and in early 1346 Kantakouzenos entered Constantinople as co-emperor. He is known as John VI. Thessalonike resisted until 1350, and four years later John V Palaiologos forced John VI to abdicate; he became a monk, and his retirement from imperial politics marks the real end of the civil war.

The war had other overtones as well. Apart from the fact that it is rather reminiscent of the revolution of 1339 in Genoa and the accession of Simone Boccanegra to
power (although no direct connection can be established: Ševčenko 1953: 603–17),
there are tantalizing statements in the sources that Alexios Apokaukos aimed at
establishing a new type of Byzantine state: essentially a coastal state, with Con-
stantinople as its capital (Kantak., vol. 2: 537). Such a state would necessarily be tied
to commerce, not to agriculture, in emulation of the maritime cities of Italy, and it
might well have been westward-looking. Moreover, the civil war was contemporary
with a crisis in the Byzantine Church, the Hesychast controversy, which centred
on the question of the possibility of experiencing God in his essence through a
form of mystical prayer, as the Hesychasts claimed (Meyendorff 1959). While the
debate regarding the experience of God in his essence rather than through his works
was certainly not novel in the context of medieval Christianity, it acquired major
importance in the 1340s and became, to some extent, tied to the civil war, mostly
because major proponents of Hesychasm, like the learned Gregory Palamas, were
also staunch supporters of Kantakouzenos. His triumph spelled theirs as well.

The political triumph was entirely illusory. In order to win the war,
Kantakouzenos had called in foreign allies: Stephen Dušan, kral of Serbia, the
Seljuks of the emirate of Aydin, and the Ottomans. Stephen Dušan had brought
the Serbian state to its apex. Expanding into Macedonia since the late thirteenth
century, the Serbs, who were experiencing a silver rush because of the production
of the Novo Brdo mines, and who were undergoing political transformations,
were ready for much more than an alliance with the Byzantines. Dušan ended up
conquering much of Macedonia, Thessaly, Epiros, and part of Greece, and besie-
ging, though not taking, Thessalonike. After the conquest of Serres, he proclaimed
himself Emperor of the Serbs and the Romans, laying claim to the universal empire.
His state was ephemeral, but after his death in 1355 Serbian principalities remained
on Byzantine soil, notably that of Serres, under John Ugljesha.

The Ottomans, too, had been invited by John Kantakouzenos to Europe, to help
him fight the civil war. In 1354, the year Kantakouzenos abdicated, they took over
the fort of Gallipoli. They were never to leave Europe again; from that strategic
position they began the conquest of the European provinces of the Empire.

The Byzantine aristocracy emerged from the civil war severely weakened. Two
civil wars with looting armies had impoverished the countryside, while Dušan
confiscated a number of estates to reward his own soldiers (Laiou 1985: 148–56;
Oikonomides 1980). Between that and the Ottoman conquests that were soon to fol-
low, the land base of the economic strength of the aristocracy was greatly reduced.
Some aristocrats were to turn to commerce and banking instead (Oikonomides
1979).

The late stages of the civil war coincided with the outbreak of the Black Death.
While direct evidence for its effects on the Byzantine Empire is much scarcer than
for western Europe, a significant demographic decline in the second half of the
fourteenth century is undisputed.
The Final Collapse (1354–1453)

The last hundred years of the Byzantine Empire are characterized by the progressive diminution of the geographic extent of the state, by constant threat from foreign enemies, especially the Ottomans, by a restructuring of the aristocracy, by civil wars, and by the increasing relative power of the Church. Economic conditions were very bad until the end of the century, a situation that affected all of southern Europe; the depression led to antagonisms and wars, very much involving the Byzantine Empire. The fact that the Byzantine state survived for a hundred years is due in great part to external causes (the reappearance of the Mongols, civil wars among the Ottomans) and to a diplomacy that, surprisingly, was still rather effective.

In the course of the long reign of John V (1341–91), the decline became obvious. The Byzantine Empire, a phantom term used here only for reasons of convention, became a very small state, which at the end of the century consisted essentially of Constantinople, parts of Thrace, Thessalonike, a few islands in the northern Aegean, and the Despotate of the Morea, the most compact territory. A majority of the Greek-speaking, Orthodox population lived under foreign occupation, whether Venetian, Genoese, Serbian, or, increasingly, Ottoman. The Ottoman advance was unrelenting. While the Ottomans were gradually bringing the Seljuk emirates of Asia Minor under their control and into their state, in Europe the cities fell one by one: Didymoteichon in 1361, Philippopolis (Plovdiv) in 1363, and, most importantly, Adrianople in 1368–9. The city became the Ottoman capital in Europe. In 1371, the Serbian ruler of Serres, John Ugljesha, was defeated at the battle of the Maritsa. This spelled an end to any possibility that the Orthodox powers of the Balkans might put up an effective defence against the Turks. The Byzantine emperors were forced to pay tribute to the Ottomans. In 1390 when Philadelphia, the last Byzantine outpost in Asia Minor, fell, the first to enter it, according to one source, were the emperors Manuel II and John VII, who were doing service in the Ottoman army (Chalk. 64). Meanwhile, Thessalonike had surrendered in 1387, although it was to return to the Byzantines in 1403 for a brief period. On 15 June 1389, the battle of Kosovo Polje broke the resistance of the Serbs. Bayezid Yildirim (Bolt of Lightning), who became sultan after the death of his father, Murad, in this battle, was to prove a formidable enemy.

Civil strife and civil war were ever present, even as the Ottomans advanced. Poor economic conditions, as well as the threat of conquest, created a good breeding ground for civil strife, especially well documented in Thessalonike. However, the civil wars, which became endemic after 1373, had no discernible social component. They were dynastic wars, pitting the princes of the royal house against each other and against the emperor John V. The aristocracy vied for control of a rapidly declining state and equally declining resources. The wars involved Genoa and Venice, in
fierce competition over dwindling trade, and the Ottomans as well. They sapped any internal strength the Byzantine Empire might still have. In 1382 there were three capitals of the Byzantine Empire: one in the town of Selymbria, under Andronikos IV Palaiologos and his son John VII, one in Thessalonike under Manuel (eventually emperor Manuel II, 1391–1425), and one in Constantinople, where John V ruled. The declining power of the state was, to some extent, picked up by the Church, whose authority extended over much larger areas, and whose economic strength, especially that of the monasteries of Mt Athos, increased through gifts by Stephen Dušan and the Ottomans, turning it into the richest institution by far in the Empire.

In 1394 the Ottomans blockaded Constantinople, and the fall of the city looked imminent. Manuel II went west to look for help. Indeed, Byzantine emperors had been hoping for succour from western Europe ever since the rise of the Ottomans became evident. A few westerners, among them the Venetian Marino Sanudo Torsello, had recognized the threat the Turks posed to Europe already in the early fourteenth century (Laiou 1972: 312–14). However, the popes, on whom much depended, tied the granting of aid to the healing of the Schism on the papacy’s terms, an abomination in the eyes of the majority of Byzantines. John V had made a personal conversion to Catholicism, with very few results. A chivalresque crusade in 1396 had ended in disaster at Nikopolis. The king of France did send to Constantinople a small force under Marshall Boucicault in 1399; but Manuel II’s three-year stay in Europe brought no tangible results (Barker 1969: 167–99). The blockade of Constantinople ended only because of the reappearance of the Mongols on the international scene. Timurlane, posing as the champion of the Seljuk emirates, fought and won a great battle against Bayezid in Ankara, in 1402. The sultan was, so it is said, placed in an iron cage and paraded throughout Timur’s domains. The Ottoman state entered a period of upheaval and civil war, affording the Byzantines both a breathing space and some territories, notably Thessalonike and Chalkidike, parts of Thrace and the Bulgarian coast, and a few islands. By 1422, however, Mehmet I had reorganized the Ottoman state, and his son, Murad II, was able to take Thessalonike (which had been given to the Venetians in 1423) by assault in 1430, while Ioannina surrendered; thus its inhabitants were spared the killing and enslavement and the city the destruction that was the common fate of those who resisted, like Thessalonike and, later, Constantinople. The monasteries of Mt Athos had surrendered already in 1423–4 (Oikonomides 1976a: 10).

The advance of the Ottoman forces led the emperor John VIII to agree to the union of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. It was proclaimed in Florence on 5 July 1439; a unionist mass was sung in Constantinople on 12 December 1452; but the people never accepted the Union. When Mehmet II came to the throne, Constantinople was isolated, depopulated, and impoverished. On 7 April 1453 he laid siege to the city. The Ottoman army, including the irregular troops, must have numbered well over the 150,000 regular soldiers that are attested. Constantinople was defended by 5,000 native troops, and about 2,000 foreigners—mostly
Genoese and Venetians. Furthermore, Mehmet II had cannon; that the city withstood the siege for over seven weeks is a tribute to its fabled walls and to the heroism of its defenders, very much including the emperor Constantine XI. When the sultan offered him the Morea and his life in exchange for the city, Constantine XI is said to have replied: 'surrendering the City is not in my power, nor in that of its other inhabitants; all of us, with a common will and purpose will die, with no regard for our lives' (Doukas 351). The emperor was killed in the last battle. The city was taken on 29 May 1453. It was mercilessly looted and destroyed, while its inhabitants were killed or enslaved. Soon thereafter, Mehmet began the process of reconstruction and repopulation, while Gennadios Scholarios, the most ardent opponent of Church Union, became patriarch.

The fall of Constantinople was followed by the conquest of the Despotate of the Morea (1460) and the Empire of Trebizond (1461). Although the Byzantine Empire had been declining rapidly for a century, it was the fall of Constantinople that signalled its end, both among the Orthodox peoples and in western Europe. Under Mehmet II and his successors, a huge empire was reborn on the ruins of the Byzantine Empire. The replacement of the weak Orthodox states of the Balkans and Asia Minor by a large, powerful, multinational, imperial state was an event of historic significance. In the late Middle Ages, after 1204, there had been signs that local, viable states with relatively compact populations might have replaced the large, multinational Byzantine Empire: Nicaea in Asia Minor, Serbia, Bulgaria, and the Palaiologan state in the Balkans. The Ottoman conquests put an end to that possibility. Thus, the area did not undergo the long and slow process of state- and nation-building that took place in western Europe. Instead, that process, abbreviated and slow to complete, began again in the nineteenth century.

To western Europe, the late Byzantine Empire made one last but major contribution. The Empire of Nicaea, like the Komnenian empire before it, could boast many intellectuals. In the Palaiologan empire, philology, philosophy, history, and art flourished. To Renaissance Italy, the dying empire contributed not only manuscripts and texts, but also significant numbers of scholars and humanists, such as Cardinal Bessarion and, for a short time, during and just after the Union of Ferrara-Florence, George Gemistos Plethon. Based as it was upon Greek letters, the Renaissance owes a great deal to the scholars trained in Byzantium.

References and Further Reading


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