ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΜΕΙΖΟΝΟΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΣΜΟΥ

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Summary :

Late Byzantine Constantinople in the Palaiologan period combines the characteristics of an imperial administrative center and those of a typical Late Medieval city where urban economy prevails. From 1261 until the mid-14th C., the imperial court and aristocracy set the pace, while during the last century of Byzantium the social profile of the city changes, and the wealthier bourgoisie gains more importance. The profile of the city is also defined to a great extend by the Italian commercial colonies, the monasteries and the lower social strata, including peasants and refugees. The social oppositions between the higher and lower social strata are intense but, though they were expressed through prolonged political crisis, they never resulted to an open revolt.

Date

1261-1453

Geographical Location

Constantinople

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1. Introduction

The social structure in Constantinople in the Palaiologan period was the result of the city's two basic functions, the political one and the economic one. As far as the political function is concerned, the city remained the centre of the imperial court and administration, with increased needs for defense; from an economic point of view, it was an exceptionally important station for the trade for both long and intermediate distances in the late Middle Ages.[1] The relative gravity of these two functons, and therefore the social profile of city, changed throughout the two centuries that roughly cover the period. Thus, until the 1340's, the city still had the characteristics of an imperial capital, which consumes the product of exploitation of the provinces, while later on it is mainly a commercial city, similar to other centres of the Mediterranean and Western Europe. For this reason the presentation that follows is separated in two parts, from 1261 until the mid-14th century, and from the mid- 14th until 1453.

2. From 1261 until the mid-14th century

We do not know many things about the society of Constantinople in the last years of the Latin Empire. The population included Westerners ('Franks'), Italians, mainly Venetians, who participated, to some extent, in the exersice of power of the Latin emperor and must have controlled almost exclusively the commercial activity; and of course, the local "Roman" (Byzantine) populace. Among the latter, there were the "thelimatarioi", farmers that cultivated land inside and outside the city walls.[2] Intermarriages between Latins and locals often took place, and the offspring of such mixed marriages, called "Gasmouloi", seems to have been mainly orientated into maritime activities.[3]

Upon the recapture of the city in 1261, most Westerners abandoned it, while the Byzantines and the Gasmouloi remained, and were mostly treated favourably. The allies of the new emperor Michael VIII, (1259-1282), the Genoese, took the place of the Venetians. After that, the emperor took measures for the repopulation of the city, renting grounds for rebuilding to the new residents and settling in the city populations with bellicose tradition, such as the Tzakones from Peloponnese, who were responsible for the rebuilding of the walls.[4] The Patriarchate was also brought back in the city, as was the aristocracy, who were granted the "houses" which they claimed belonged to their families before 1204. In the next decades the population must have increased significantly. By the end of Michael VIII's reign, the communities of Venetians and other western merchants had re-emerged, while the Genoese moved in the district of Galata, on the opposite shore of the Golden Horn, which developed into an essentially independent city. The main social groups that are distinguished in this period are the following:

First, the upper nobility: it consisted of the relatives of the emperor, blood relatives and descendants of the founder of the Palaiologan dynasty, but also those related to them by marriage, even from the period before their accession. Their origins often went back to other noble families that had been distinguished already from the 11th and 12th century, illustrated in the combinations of family names

that they bore (such as Doukas, Komnenos, Angelos, Kantakouzenos, Synadenos, Tarchaneiotes, Tornikes, Raoul etc.) To this circle, added were families of administrative officials who were in emperor's favour (such as Akropolitai, Choumnoi, Mouzalones, Metochitai). The aristocrats serve the emperor as provincial governors (*kefalai*, mean. "heads") and as military governors, while their place in the hierarchy of the court is determined by a series of honorary titles and dignities (the *offikia*). Their income stems from provincial estates and their depended farmers (paroikoi), usually concessed to them by the emperor. Although they spend much of their time in the provinces, they still consider Constantinople their base, where they maintain their splendid houses and they found or renovate monasteries intended to become their burial places. Many allocated extensive escort, and their extravagant way of life constitutes a lever of growth for the economy of the city.[5]

Below the upper aristocracy comes a group of people of various trades and income is concerned, but of similar origins, education and behavior. This group is characterized by the close social ties between its members, and could be deemed as “middle-upper class”. Its members are well educated, they usually come from distinguished families of provincial cities that came to Constantinople in order to pursue further education, but mostly to seek for the favour of powerful persons and to obtain an administrative or an ecclesiastical office. Some achieved high-ranking posts and – thanks to their involvement with the administration – enormous wealth; they sometimes managed to move to the level of upper aristocracy. Others occupied ecclesiastical posts and they could become bishops. Many however remained schoolteachers, copyists, scribes on commission or lesser administrative officials. The scholars of this period often came from this social level.[6] Also closely related to this group were affluent businessmen who invested in the administrative system, particularly in the subleasing of tax collection. Activities of that kind were probably the most lucrative investment in this period, but perhaps for reasons of class prestige, the aristocracy avoided them, leaving the field open for those who had the necessary funds.

As far as a "bourgeois" class is concerned, it is generally underdeveloped in comparison to what we can observe in other European cities. This is undoubtedly due to the absolute domination of Italians and other Western tradesmen in the commercial activity of Constantinople. It did not only prevent the growth of a local class of high-scale merchants, but also, due to imports of cheap products, such as tissues from the West, it halted the growth of a domestic *proto-industry*, orientated to large-scale exportations. On the other hand, the needs of on-the-spot consumption, the building activity of emperors and aristocrats, the intense movement and activity of the harbour of Constantinople allowed the growth of a class of craftsmen and both small- and medium-enterprise tradesmen. Thus, we find references to tanners, furriers, shipbuilders and repairers of boats, tradesmen of various types, and, most frequently, the *kapeloi*, owners of small taverns, but also money changers who exchanged currencies on their stalls, an early sort of banking activity.[7]

The lower social strata in the city included workers, servants of big houses, fishermen,[8] wandering tradesmen, prostitutes, landworkers, gardeners and other farmers. A particular category were the refugees who came to the capital either from Asia Minor at the period of Turkish expansion (between 1280-1310), or from the rural hinterland of Thrace in periods of raids (as the Catalan crisis 1305- 1307, or the civil war in 1341-1347).

In the description of city’s society we should include the military forces that were responsible for guarding of city and the palaces (Tzakones, Varangians etc), the men of the navy, which was dissolved in 1382, in order to be recomposed in the 1330’s; also monks of both sexes, as well as clergymen, often poor.[9] Of course we should not overlook the substantial number and economic activity of Westerners, whose communities included not only tradesmen, but also notaries, craftsmen, catholic monks, etc.[10] Other local groups, but distinct from the orthodox Christian populace are the Armenians and mainly the Jews, that lived in a defined area; those were mainly engaged with tanning and were occasionally the target of the most intolerant voices, who requested their removal .[11]

3. From the mid-14th century until 1453

During the fifth decade of 14th century, the society of Constantinople experienced an important upheaval. During the civil wars of 1341-1347, many members of the high aristocracy fell out of favour and disappeared from the scene, some were exiled or killed, and many fell victims of the epidemic plague of 1348. The loss of territories for the Empire meant also the destruction of its economic

base, not only for the aristocrats, but also for all those whose income derived mainly from rural activities. In the same period, the crisis in the relations between the Italian cities and the Mongols of the Golden Horde, pushed the Byzantines to claim part of the lucrative trade in the Black Sea.[12] Even if they did not succeed in becoming an independent commercial power, the Byzantine merchants began to participate actively in this trade as associates of the Italian tradesmen, contributing investments and merchandise. For the first time the aristocrats turned to these activities, overcoming a long-standing prejudice.[13] Constantinople at the last century of its existence as a Byzantine city had a relatively small population and the characteristics of a city-harbour, where trade and similar activities determined the shape of its society. Its social structure could be described as follows:

Aristocracy remains at the top, but is now a limited group of few relatives of the emperor and other high-rank dignitaries. Usually their economic means are independent from imperial generosity (contrary to the previous period) and include, as we have already mentioned, funds invested on commercial and financial activities, though they maintain their estates inside and outside the city. Apart from the old aristocratic names they also introduce new ones, which shows the infiltration of commercial bourgeois families into the upper aristocracy (Sofianos, Notaras, Eudaimonoioannes, Dermokaites etc). However they seek court degnities, mainly for reasons of prestige, but also in order to exert influence on political choices.[14]

The middle class follows, as this was how the affluent bourgeois were called from the mid-14th century onward. As aristocrats, they invest their wealth on trade, financial activities, and the sublease of the relatively few state revenues that remain, and the richest craftsmen probably belong to this group. Recently an attractive suggestion has been formulated, namely that the organisation of the urban population follows the Italian model of urban organisation, but our information on this is scant.[15] A small number of church officials constitutes a politically important group.[16]

The composition of the lower social groups should not differ considerably from that of the previous period, described above, but they had considerably decreased in numbers. The surviving registry of the patriarchal court give a colourful picture of priests or owners of small pieces of land, who are in utmost economic poverty and they strive by any means for their survival. Despite the extensive social oppositions, we do not have open revolts of the lower social classes in late Byzantine Constantinople, contrary to what happens in Europe in the same period, and also in other Byzantine cities in the mid-14th century. However the literary sources show a intensifying animosity of the bourgeois toward the aristocracy, and crises are not altogether avoided, such as the reaction toward the union of the churches or a number of dynastic conflicts which were probably rooted in deeper social oppositions.[17]

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12. It seems that already by 1330, some Byzantine merchants had turned to maritime commercial activity. However, the assertion that these groups were in conflict with traditional aristocracy during the civil war is rather unsustained.

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Society in Late Byzantine Period

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Glossary :

Golden Horde

Conventional designation of the state of *Ulus Jochi* or the *Khanate Kipchak*. It was a nation, that was a cross of Turcs and Mongolians and lived in the west part of the Mongolian Empire. The Horde flourished from the middle of the 13th century until the end of the 14th century and built up important commercial relationships with the nations of the Mediterranean Sea, especially the Genoese.

paroikos

(Byz.) Dependent peasants, usually on estates of large landowners or on ecclesiastical estates.