

# Approaching the Byzantine Past in the Historical Work of Dositheos of Jerusalem and Meletios of Athens\*

The use of the Byzantine past in Orthodox Church history – that is, the process of historicizing the past of the Orthodox Church in the Ottoman East – is a complicated case. It involves drawing the outlines of a proto-national identity against the Other, which is mainly a religious identity ruling out Moslems and the non-Orthodox Westerners<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, it reflects the deep inner quest for the reason of losing control of one's own history and the means of regaining it. The mainly moralistic and didactic access, which begun already in the closing decades of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (see, for example, the work of Iosif Bryennios) is encapsulated in the motto ὁ κανὼν τοῦ γένους («the punishment of the nation»). The Ottoman rule was penance »for our sins« (διὰ τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν), which was an old cliché since dating from the Byzantine era<sup>2</sup>.

On the other hand, textual and historical criticism, which was already highly developed in late Byzantium in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, was transplanted to and evolved further in Italy in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, becoming a cornerstone of the later Enlightenment, and in turn affected Greek scholars and thinkers (mainly Churchmen) under Ottoman rule. An example is Michael Trivolis (1470-1556) who studied in Italy close to Pico della Mirandola, then became a monk (1504) and travelled 1516 to Russia under the name of Maxim Grek in order to purge liturgical Slavonic texts of errors, an enterprise for which he was rewarded with many years of prison, between approximately 1525 and 1551<sup>3</sup>. This alternation between moralistic narratives focused on theodicy and historical criticism characterized post-Byzantine Greek historical works, and especially the Anonymous Chronicle of 1570 which re-elaborated historical material from the Italian work of Paolo Giovio and old Byzantine works during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The polemic on two fronts against the non-Orthodox Other culminated after the first decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the battle between Reformation and Counter-Reformation reached the Orthodox Christians under Moslem rule, and each side tried to win over the Orthodox Church<sup>4</sup>. Shortly after that, that is, after the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Enlightenment

posed a challenge to all Christian denominations, and reflection on what went wrong in the past of Orthodox Christians as well as apologetics against hostile Westerners had to be combined with a more synthetic view of the history of Christianity, as a response to the challenge of an anti-clerical or even anti-Christian historical narrative put forth by the representatives of the Enlightenment. It is this phase that forms the background to the use of the Byzantine past in two major synthetic works of Orthodox Church history, those of Dositheos, Patriarch of Jerusalem (focusing on Jerusalem) and that of Meletios Mētros, bishop of Athens.

## The work of Dositheos of Jerusalem

Dositheos of Jerusalem (1641-1707) represents the Church leader who resists the mighty attack of the Roman Catholics who, under French protection, sought to establish themselves in Ottoman territory and especially in the Holy Land. Dositheos was born in the Peloponnese in today's Greece and ordained a deacon in 1652. After being consecrated as Patriarch of Jerusalem in 1669 (a year that marked the eclipse of Venetian dominance in the Aegean with the loss of Crete to the Ottomans and the appointment of the first Ottoman foreign minister of Greek origin, Panayiotis Nikoussios), he tried to strengthen the position of the Orthodox Church under the Ottomans against both Catholics and Protestants by convening a Council in Jerusalem in 1672, rejecting the crypto-Calvinist aspects of the then-circulating Confession of Faith by the late Patriarch of Constantinople Cyrill Lucaris, who had been murdered by the Ottomans in 1638. In his whole literary work and Church administration, Dositheos sought to counter the increasingly widespread image of Orthodox teaching as being close to Calvinist predestination and the rejection of the veneration of saints. At the same time he tried to reorient the polemic against the Catholics towards the known dividing issues of the *filioque* and especially the primacy of the Roman See, while he fought constantly with

\* The following presentation expands on the reception of Byzantium in the Greek-speaking Church history of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century.

1 See mainly Demacopoulos/Papanikolaou, Postcolonial esp. 8-10.

2 Cf. the use of this expression to explain the Byzantine Civil War of 1341-1347 in the document Nr. 129 (Miklosich/Müller, Acta 1, 286).

3 See about Maxim, Geanakoplos, Maximos 445-468.

4 See the political aspect of this struggle in Hering, Patriarchat 97-145.

the Franciscans who strove to gain control over the Holy Sepulchre and Bethlehem.

In his »History of the Patriarchs of Jerusalem«, posthumously edited (1721) by his nephew Chrysanthos Notaras (1663-1731), who divided the book into 12 chapters (hence is its often called the Twelve Books, Δωδεκάβιβλος), Dositheos tried to give scholarly support to his church-political goal of the reassertion of the identity of Orthodox Church. To this end, he narrated the historical continuity of the Orthodox Church in the East and the resilience of that identity in past and present<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, he tries to build bridges to anti-papal forces within the Catholic Church, like the Gallican theologians (who are also explicitly mentioned in Chrysanthos's foreword to the book)<sup>6</sup>. Research has focused on the connection of this work with the emergence of a whole genre of sacred *Historia* in Western Europe during the Confessional wars in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In this »war of books«, Dositheos refutes detail by detail the Catholic narrative about the permanent centrality of Rome in the historical course of the Christian Church and the illegitimacy of the schism which the Greek Orthodox Church had provoked, notably according to Leo Allatius (a »uniate« Greek Catholic writer)<sup>7</sup>, who had already produced an extensive book about the Schism<sup>8</sup>. In our perspective, the polemical character of the presentation of historical material can be related to the scholastic technique of exposing and refuting the arguments posed regarding every historical issue. Therefore, the detailed narration is frequently interrupted by accounts of the Roman position (e.g. the placement of Rome in the first centuries, the authority of convening Ecumenical Councils, the story of the female pope etc). Accordingly, Byzantine history becomes an organic part of Orthodox identity against Roman claims in aspects of ecclesiology, notably papal authority, the rank of the patriarchate of Jerusalem and the like. Dositheos insists that the »God-beloved emperors« (θεοφιλείς αὐτοκράτορες) had convened all ecumenical councils; this serves as an argument against Roman primacy based on the fact that the emperors and not the Roman See were entitled to summon an ecumenical council<sup>9</sup>. Commenting further on the administration of Constantine I, he justifies his title as bishop of God as being of a higher degree than the general priesthood of lay Christians, because of his measures in favour of Christians and against the pagans. He lists 26 such measures, including the summoning of councils and the war against the Persians in defence of Christians there, and concludes: »use now this measure and see the next emperors, Theodosiuses, Marcian, Justin, Justinian, Constantine the Bearded and other emper-

ors, and learn which of them appear imitators of Constantine and through him of our Lord Jesus Christ«<sup>10</sup>. There are exceptions, of course. The iconoclastic emperor Constantine V is called a »hard-hearted Pharaoh«<sup>11</sup>. At the same time, he praises Justinian II who sent capitals to Avimelech (i.e. Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan), thus preventing him from stripping the Church of Gethsemane in order to build his temple in Jerusalem<sup>12</sup>. Dositheos states that »so much did the pious emperors care for the Holy Land«<sup>13</sup>, giving a hint that connects his own jurisdiction with its Byzantine heritage. In his seventh book, he gives a rather detailed albeit not particularly accurate account of important political and Church-political events concerning the Byzantine Empire until the 11<sup>th</sup> century. He refers to Nicephoros I (802-811) as Phocas, which is the family name of Nicephoros II (963-969), and accuses him of introducing capital tax, which served as a model for the Ottoman haraj<sup>14</sup>. He closely follows the events recorded in the Chronography of the Byzantine monk Theofanes, reproducing the same inaccuracies<sup>15</sup>. Yet his main concern is to state that the accumulating challenges and external enemies of the Empire did not affect the Church as much as the apostasy of the Roman See had done, which turned the defender of the Church to a traitor<sup>16</sup>. From this short overview we can conclude that the traditional polemical historical narrative at the peak of the confessional controversies uses Byzantium more or less as a stage in order to outline the unbreakable continuity of the Eastern Church with the original One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. Any other information or historical criticism of facts and persons in Byzantine history are motivated by this larger purpose.

## The »Ecclesiastical History« of Meletios of Athens

The other historian whose views are discussed here is practically contemporaneous (1661-1714) with Dositheos – indeed the two are known to have corresponded – but was closer intellectually to the Enlightenment. Meletios was born in Ioannina and was trained in Padua like most of his educated contemporaries. After heading a school in his hometown of Ioannina, he was elected metropolitan of Nafpaktos (Lepante, in the western part of today's Greece) in 1692 but he was overthrown in 1697, accused of involvement in a conspiracy against the Ottoman authorities. Nevertheless he was protected by his friend, the aforementioned Chrysanthos Notaras<sup>17</sup>, which contributed to his being compensated by

5 For Dositheos see the fundamental work of Todt, Dositheos 659-720 and relevant literature in the older Podskalsky, *Theologie* 283-284. Among other works the monograph of Durã, Dositheos ought to be underscored.

6 Dositheos, *History*, Prol. Chrys.: 1, 12-13.

7 Sarris, *Historia*.

8 See Podskalsky, *Theologie* 213-217.

9 Dositheos, *History* 5, 355-378.

10 Dositheos, *History* 2, 11.

11 Dositheos, *History* 3, 443.

12 A story unknown to me from elsewhere. About the project of the Dome of the Rock see Nasser, *Dome*.

13 Dositheos, *History* 3, 449.

14 Dositheos *History* 4, 76.

15 Dositheos, *History* 3, 438.

16 Dositheos, *History* 4, 265.

17 About Chrysanthos Notaras, see Stathi, *Chrysanthos*.

his election as metropolitan of Athens in 1703. He left Athens ten years later because of various allegations originating from internal strife in the city. Until his premature death in 1714, he wrote books on the natural sciences, in which he proclaims adherence to the Copernican system<sup>18</sup>, and well as a history of the Church consisting of three volumes. The most thorough study of his work can be found in the doctoral dissertation of Konstantinos Kyriakopoulos<sup>19</sup>. While Dositheos was a Church leader, Meletios is more of a scholarly priest, who presents a panoramic view of a global history of the Church, assessed by historical criticism and divided into chapters for every century, most likely following the model of the Magdeburg Centuries. It has been pointed out that the way Meletios quoted his sources (among which one finds Bellarmin and Baronius)<sup>20</sup>, his sober manner of expanding on difficult, controversial issues, like the emergence and the character of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>21</sup>, put his work clearly in the Enlightened historiographical tradition, perhaps that of the Catholic Enlightenment of the Jansenists, of whom he knew<sup>22</sup>. More interesting is the effort to print it in a more elaborate way some decades after his death in 1784, by people who obviously were engaged in the so-called Neohellenic Enlightenment, namely Polyzois Lampanitziotis and Georgios Vendotis (1757-1795). The latter added a volume during his editing of the manuscript of Meletios. Vendotis was a scholar who lived in Vienna and edited Greek books or translated books from French into Greek for the printing house of Jacob Baumeister. His interests involved works of the French Enlightenment and later he became friend and companion of Rhegas Velestinlis (1757-1798), who was a prominent political thinker and a propagator of a democratic and free state that would replace (after an insurgence of all peoples) the authoritarian Ottoman Empire. Although Velestinlis was arrested by the Austrian police, handed over to Ottoman authorities and murdered in Belgrade<sup>23</sup>, it is obvious that the small group of Vienna was firmly committed to the proliferation of ideas of Enlightenment among the Greeks. Why did this circle support the work of Meletios?

To return to Meletios, he was known for another work that was definitely a product of Enlightenment, namely his »Geography«. Geographical works pioneered the dissemination of the maxims of Enlightenment in education. Meletios is no exception, and he states in the prologue of this work that »nothing pleases the cosmopolitan man (κοσμοπολίτην ἄνθρωπον) more than geography«, for »if this world is nothing but a big city of man, what would be more disgraceful and humiliating for the citizen of this city, that is man, to ignore the gates, the streets or the squares of that city«<sup>24</sup>. This metaphor proved to be very popular in other geographical works of known advocates of the Enlightenment<sup>25</sup> and

testifies to the innovative thinking of Meletios. It is important to note, though, that in this same prologue, in order to invoke ancient authoritative minds, he quotes the relevant prologue of the Byzantine writer and philosopher Nicephoros Gregoras to his *Rhomaikē Historia*, written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century in which Gregoras also praises knowledge of Geography as a necessary supplement to history<sup>26</sup>. For us it is significant to observe the conjunction of a Byzantine authority with a project participating in the spirit of the Enlightenment, and it will help us to understand his notion of the Byzantine past in his historical work.

Bearing in mind the above remarks, we can now situate Meletios' »History« within the broader picture of the Enlightenment. This becomes clearer in the foreword to the »History« by the aforementioned editor Georgios Vendotis, who begins by praising the rule of law. He stresses the importance of abiding by the law for every community, adding that laws irrigated human actions like water, helping them improve and consolidating the close bonds necessary for human prosperity. Moreover, they contribute to the skills and institutions that are necessary in the short lives of humans. In their absence, the commonwealth would be driven by the corrupted instincts of its members to catastrophe. If this is a general principle, how much more applicable must it be to the sacred community, that is the Orthodox Church, which must learn the law of God in order to understand and pursue salvation? And after this introduction, Vendotis underscores the value of Church history in order to introduce properly to the work of Meletios<sup>27</sup>.

Meletios himself opens his lengthy work with preliminary definitions of history, notions and persons of sacred history (e.g. the Old Testament), then he recapitulates older Church historians since Eusebios (a sort of *status quaestionis*), after which he expands on historical periods and political titles. He repeats the old definition of the king as »the lawful overseer on all subjects, neither benefiting nor harming according to subjective wishes, but setting goals and rewarding everybody equally, see for his duties in Greco-Roman Law chap. 4«. The reference here is ultimately to the Byzantine text of *Epanagoge/Eisagoge*, written at the end of 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>28</sup>. Further, he explains that Romans did not adopt the title after the reign of Tarquinius Superbus although they aspired to maintain the monarchy, which was considered very effective in military terms. Hence they devised other names as *Augustus* (as if he were something divine rather than human) and *Imperator*, which practically means the same and was translated as *Basileus* in Greek<sup>29</sup>. He adds that Christian kings were the shepherds of Christ's legacy and then mentions that this title was never used by Greek chronographers to designate rulers outside Constantinople, as they named other European kings

18 Nicolaidis, Science 138.

19 Kyriakopoulos, Meletios.

20 Meletios History 1, XXXII.

21 Meletios History, VIIc, chap. 3,1-9: 2, 154-157.

22 Sarris, Historia 380-383.

23 See generally on Rhigas, Woodhouse, Rhigas.

24 Meletios Geography, Prol. 3.

25 See Papageorgiou, Geographies 362.

26 Gregoras, Historia I, 1 5.

27 Meletios, History 1, XII-XIV.

28 See Scharf, Quellenstudien 77-78.

29 Meletios, History, Prol. chap. 3: 1, 55-56.

reges. He further explains, though, that »Rex is the lawful ruler. And the one whom the Latins call Emperor of Romans, we call *Rex Alamanorum*. This prevailed after Theoderic etc.« Finally, he analyses why Greeks are called »Romans«, citing Chalkokondyles<sup>30</sup>. According to him, Rome became a powerful empire, which conquered Byzantium, among other cities. Although this city (Byzantium) was predominantly Greek in language and habits and later became the capital, the Emperors chose not to use the title »King of the Greeks« but to maintain the Roman name for the imperial title<sup>31</sup>.

This programmatic clarification of relevance to Church history also has, I think, a very concrete political meaning. If we follow the logical consequence of these definitions backwards, from the end to the beginning, we may note that Meletios (a) stresses that the Roman (Byzantine) empire is Greek but inherited the Roman legacy; (b) he does not deny the lawful claim of other European monarchs to royal power; (c) he identifies the Roman *Imperator* with the Greek king; and (d) Greek (or Roman) royal power is, according to Meletios, subject to the rule of law. An additional aspect relevant for the Church historian is that Christian kings have an important role as shepherds or housekeepers of Jesus Christ. Although we can detect a certain criticism of the use of the title *Augustus* (ὡς ὢν πλεον τι παρὰ ἄνθρωπος – as if he were something more than human), the general picture is that this Medieval and Byzantine system of political power is, its shortcomings notwithstanding, subject to the rule of law. Byzantine history is hence not apart from the history of the European Enlightenment. On the top of that there is an echo of the propagator of the narrative about the unbroken continuity of the Greek nation: The historian Constantinos Paparrhegopoulos (1815-1891). In this same passage of Meletios' History, he refers to the Byzantines as the ἡμέτεροι (our people)<sup>32</sup>, the same way Paparrhegopoulos would do in his authoritative »History of the Greek nation« a century later (e.g. his description of the once byzantine northern Italy which was conquered by Lombards and regained by the King of Franks Pippin as »the lands belonging once to us in Northern Italy«<sup>33</sup>. This puts him in clear contrast to other scholars of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Greece, who (still under the influence of Classicism) spoke of an »occupation« of Greece by the Byzantines (βυζαντινὴ δυναστεία – that is the case of Professor of Constitutional Law Nikolaos Saripolos 1817-1887!)<sup>34</sup>.

Meletios's preliminary remarks gain weight when they are examined parallel to other works of Greek thinkers or writers within the Church who also stress the importance of the rule of law. That is the case with Theophilos Papaphilou (1715-1793), bishop of Campania (Verroia, NW Greece)<sup>35</sup>. In the foreword to his *Procheiron Nomikon* (Handbook of Ecclesias-

tical Law), published after 1750, he stresses the importance of the rule of law, which must characterize every form of public authority, in contrast to mere tyranny. He drew his examples from classical Greek and Roman antiquity<sup>36</sup>. Nevertheless, the work of Theophilos concerned canon law, and it would make sense to outline its importance for readers who were mainly administrative functionaries within the Church mechanism. In the case of Meletios, on the other hand, we have a theoretical work recording the history of the Church, and I think one cannot see any other purpose than a kind of political declaration situating him against the horizon of the Enlightenment and connecting the Byzantine past with the whole of European history seen as an evolution of the Greco-Roman heritage.

## The reception

Although the »Dodekavivlos« of Dositheos used the network of the patriarchate of Jerusalem and found its way into many libraries<sup>37</sup>, the real breakthrough was the Church history of Meletios. Of course, the process of financing the project or even a second edition, which was inaugurated in 1853 but never completed, was full of obstacles. Obviously circles within the Church found the work too sober, too »dry«, inappropriate for apologetic purposes<sup>38</sup>. Yet, in the end, Manuel Gedeon, the famous Constantinopolitan historian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1851-1943), wrote that school textbooks of Church history had for many years, until his lifetime, been based on summaries of the Church History of Meletios<sup>39</sup>. It was translated into Romanian in 1841-1843. Moreover, Meletios' History was specifically cited in later historical works like that of Anastasios Diomedes-Kyriakos published in 1874, and in its later editions<sup>40</sup>. This also affects how Byzantium was perceived in the Greek-speaking Church history.

It seems that the rejection of the Byzantine period during the zenith of Neoclassicism before 1860s affected Church history to a lesser degree, not only out of interest in the defence of dogmatic identity, but also because of the impact of the legacy of this work of Meletios, which strove to reconcile at a very early moment the Oriental, despotic image of Byzantium created by Voltaire and Edward Gibbon (who published his book roughly at the same time as that of Meletios) with the maxims of early modern critical history and political philosophy. Presenting Byzantium as an early heir to Greco-Roman political theory is an approach typical of Enlightenment ideas and also found in other works by Greek Orthodox clergymen.

Moreover, this short analysis of two Histories by Dositheos und Meletios reveals that the image of the alleged homogeneity and purity of the literature of Orthodox Greeks, which

30 Chalcocondyles, *Historia*, I, 1 6.

31 Meletios, *History*, Prol. chap. 3: 1, 56-57.

32 See Meletios *History*, Prol. chap. 3: 1, 56.

33 ἀνήκουσαι ἄλλοτε εἰς τοὺς ἡμετέρους ἐν τῇ Ἄνω Ἱταλίᾳ. Paparrhegopoulos, *History* 3, 515.

34 More about that in Demetrakopoulos, *Byzantion* 68.

35 See Podskalsky, *Theologie* 354-356.

36 Theophilos, *Procheiron* 12-14.

37 Podskalsky, *Theologie* 294.

38 Sarris, *Historia* 654-656.

39 More in Sarris, *Historia* 657.

40 Diomedes-Kyriakos, *History* 13. 17. 48. 87. 102. 200.

is supposed to have grown in isolation from Western influence, has to be replaced by a far more complicated process of evolution and synthesis that moves from the situation of mere theological polemics against the West (Dositheos) to a

kind of dialogue with later intellectual currents of the West, specifically the Enlightenment, as we can also discern in other works of Meletios of Athens. This dialogue affects obviously the perception of Byzantium.

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## Summary / Zusammenfassung

### Approaching the Byzantine Past in the Historical Work of Dositheos of Jerusalem and Meletios of Athens

The paper examines the account of Byzantium in the History of the Patriarchs of Jerusalem by Dositheos, patriarch of Jerusalem, edited posthumously in 1721 by his nephew, and the Ecclesiastical History written by the metropolitan of Athens, Meletios Mētros, a contemporary of Dositheos, whose work was edited in 1784, many years after his death. Dositheos uses Byzantium quite indiscriminately as a source of material for arguments to combat the dogmatic, ecclesiological, canonical and even property claims of the Western Church against the Orthodox. Meletios uses his contemporary historical works and methods to suggest an insight into Byzantium through the eyes of the Enlightenment, which probably explains why his work was edited by circles promoting the so-called »Modern Greek Enlightenment« in Vienna.

### Annäherung an die byzantinische Vergangenheit im historischen Werk des Dositheos von Jerusalem und des Meletios von Athen

Der Aufsatz untersucht die Darstellung von Byzanz in der Geschichte der Patriarchen von Jerusalem des Dositheos, selbst Patriarch von Jerusalem, die von seinem Neffen 1721 posthum herausgegeben wurde, sowie die Kirchengeschichte des Metropoliten von Athen, Meletios Metros, eines Zeitgenossen des Dositheos, dessen Werk erst 1784, viele Jahre nach seinem Tod, herausgegeben wurde. Dositheos benutzte Byzanz durchaus unterschiedslos als Materialquelle für Argumente zur Bekämpfung der dogmatischen, ekklesiologischen, kanonischen und auch Eigentumsansprüche der Westkirche gegen die Orthodoxe Kirche. Meletios diente seine gleichzeitig entstandenen historischen Arbeiten und Methoden dazu, ein Verständnis von Byzanz anzuregen, das von der Perspektive der Aufklärung ausging. Wahrscheinlich war dies auch der Grund dafür, warum sein Werk in den Kreisen einen Herausgeber fand, die sich in Wien für die sogenannte »neugriechische Aufklärung« einsetzten.