

AN UNUSUAL BYZANTINE TITLE: “DESPOT OF THE BLACK SEA”

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A letter of January 1446 sent by King Alfonso V of Aragon and Naples to Demetrios Palaiologos, brother of the Byzantine Emperor John VIII, employs in relation to the latter the term of „Despot of the Black Sea”. The title may have been bestowed upon Demetrios in 1440, soon after the return of the Byzantine delegation from Florence, and it reflects in fact the Byzantine conception of the unity of the Pontic space, with the sea lying at the core.

Key-words: despot, Black Sea.

In 1437, Demetrios, John VIII Palaiologos’ brother, was among those who accompanied the Emperor to Italy. Both in Florence, and later on, after the Byzantine delegation returned to Constantinople, Demetrios assumed the role of opposing the Union of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. One may even say that, in an almost natural way, Demetrios Palaiologos’ attitude corresponded to that of Sultan Murad II, a declared enemy of this union, albeit for completely different reasons. This convergence in views can explain the events of the spring and summer of 1442, when Demetrios Palaiologos, with the help of the Ottoman troops sent by the Sultan, besieged the Imperial Byzantine capital.

The main historical source for these events is Georgios Sphrantzes, who was directly involved in the events. This is a synopsis of his account. On the 20th of October 1441, Constantine, Despot of Morea, one of the Emperor’s brother and himself future Emperor, sent Sphrantzes on an embassy “to the Sultan and to the Emperor”. Sphrantzes had been entrusted with “a secret mission” to John VIII. If the Emperor agreed, he would have traveled further, to Messembria, on the Black Sea shore, where “Despot kyr Demetrios” resided, and propose him an exchange. Demetrios should take the place of Constantine, and the latter, “returning to Constantinople again, should receive Sili<m>vria and the country he had held before, Mesemvria, and all the other lands up to Derca” (Derkos). “Once there”, near the capital, Constantine’s ultimate goal was “to be hopeful of his succession to the throne, as the Emperor desired.” John VIII agreed with the mission, and Georgios Sphrantzes set out for Messembria in January 1442, to meet “Despot kyr Demetrios.” His efforts amounted to nothing, as Demetrios refused to make the exchange. Moreover, on 23rd of April 1442, “Despot kyr Demetrios, together with the Turks, rushed upon the capital, besieged it, and caused great devastation in the

neighboring regions.”¹ According to a different source, the siege lasted until 6th of August.² It seems that the siege was lifted when information about John Hunyadi’s successful military actions at the Lower Danube had reached the Turkish camp.³

Meanwhile, Despot Constantine tried to help his brother. He embarked and sailed from the Peloponesus to Constantinople. He never reached his destination, because an Ottoman squadron intercepted him, and forced him to lay anchor in Lemnos. He remained there until November, when, helped by eight galleys sent by the Venetians, he was able to continue his journey to the capital.⁴ Soon after, certainly before the 6th of March 1443, the peace was signed by Sultan Murad II, the Byzantines and Constantine Palaiologos.⁵

Henceforth, the available sources give scarce information on the events, and historians hold different views on Despot Demetrios’s fate in the following years. Thus, according to Laonikos Chalkokondyles, who, usually, is rather imprecise with regard to this crisis and the fratricide war: “the Emperor took away from him most of his country.”⁶ Therefore, as a result of his action, Demetrios was deprived only of a part of his appanage. Moreover, in one of the short Byzantine chronicles, there is a clear tendency to play down his role in the events of 1442. As it has already been noticed, according to this source, the Ottomans besieged Constantinople, whereas Despot Demetrios merely assisted them. This seems to indicate that the crisis of his relations with the Emperor ebbed, and, therefore, he may have been able to keep part of his possessions⁷. An argument to support this view is that, after things returned to normal, in March 1443, John VIII gave Constantine only Selymbria, *but not Messembria*. The governor appointed in Selymbria was Georgios Sphrantzes himself, the well-trusted counselor of Constantine Palaiologos. Sphrantzes makes the following account of his appointment: “... and on 1st of March <Constantine> received from the Emperor Sili<m>vria and sent me over as a governor; with orders to defend it from the Sultan and from Despot Demetrios, and

¹ Georgios Sphrantzes, *Memorii, 1401–1477*, ed. by Vasile Grecu, Bucharest, 1966, p. 65. See also Louis Bréhier, *Vie et mort de Byzance*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1969, p. 408.

² See Peter Schreiner’s edition and comments in *Die byzantinische Kleinchroniken*, I, Wien, 1975, p. 216; II, Wien, 1977, p. 461.

³ N. Iorga, *Notes et extraits pour servir à l’histoire des croisades au XVe siècle*, III, Paris, 1902, p. 110, note 3; see also Idem, *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches nach den Quellen dargestellt*, I (bis 1451), Gotha, 1908, p. 430.

⁴ Georgios Sphrantzes, *op. cit.*, p. 65 and 67; F. Thiriet, *Régestes des délibérations du Sénat de Venise concernant la Roumanie*, III, Paris-LaHaye, 1971, no. 2597, p. 98 (January the second, 1443: it was known in Venice, on the 10th September, 1442, that the ottoman fleet, which had 60 *fuste*, had left the Straits to besiege „Dragassi” (Constantine), the Emperor’s brother, in the island Lemnos (*Stalimine*) (N. Iorga, *Notes et extraits*, III, p. 102; F. Thiriet, *op. cit.*, III, no 2590, p. 96).

⁵ N. Iorga, *Notes et extraits*, III, p. 110, note 3.

⁶ Laonic Chalcocondil, *Expuneri istorice*, translated by Vasile Grecu, Bucharest, 1958, p. 183.

⁷ Peter Schreiner, *op. cit.*, II, p. 461. According to a source used by Louis Bréhier (*op. cit.*, p. 408), Murad himself, in view of a new crusade from the West, insisted that Demetrios should accept to give up the litigious territory (or, at least, in my opinion, a part of it) and to make peace with John VIII, who was his vassal.

even from the Emperor who had handed it over.”⁸ In my view, this clearly indicates the presence of Demetrios Palaiologos in the neighboring lands, therefore in Messembria. Thus, I agree with Donald M. Nicol’s interpretation to Sphrantzes’ text⁹.

Soon after, in June 1443, a new change occurred. It was decided in Constantinople that “the entire country of Despot kyr Theodore” (Palaiologos), more exactly Moreea, should pass on to Constantine, who in exchange would hand over Selymbria. The same ship on which Constantine had sailed to Mistra, on the 8th of December, took his other brother, Theodore, to Constantinople. And, according to another short Byzantine chronicle, the exchange was not at all meaningless. It was Theodore who now hoped “to become emperor.”¹⁰ One can see here an incredible clash of ambitions within the imperial family, at a time when the Empire, fragmented and almost reduced to nothing, was on the verge of collapse...

The historical framework was meant as an introduction to a new and quite surprising source, only partially edited until now: a letter of response sent in January 1446 by King Alfonso V of Aragon and Naples to Demetrios Palaiologos. Constantin Marinescu previously mentioned this source in a monograph published posthumously in Barcelona in 1994.¹¹ The message of the Byzantine despot was carried to the court in Naples by a messenger “Vicencius of Lemeny”, who must have arrived there by the end of the previous year. The king answered the request(s) submitted to him – the object of which we can only guess – in a quite equivocal way: he was much too caught up in his Italian affairs, but he was willing to give all due consideration to the matter at a more suitable time (*Quidem idem quod vos optatis, jocundum sane esset efficere, sed res italice, multis implicite nexibus, ita nos involutos habent, ut nequaquam commode ipsis in rebus impresenciarum vaccare possumus*). Constantin Marinescu also noticed and reproduced the title attributed by King Alfonso to Demetrios: “Despot of the Black Sea” (*dispotes Maris Maioris*). However, Marinescu did not pay attention to this title, although he mentioned the “Despotate of the Black Sea” that belonged to Demetrios in several other parts of his writing.¹² One should add that Marinescu was the first historian to point out to this document kept in the archives of the Aragon Crown, and to the aforementioned title, even if very briefly, in 1939.¹³ This

⁸ Georgios Sphrantzes, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁹ Donald M. Nicol, *The Immortal Emperor. The Life and Legend of Constantine Palaiologos, last Emperor of the Romans*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 19: „The Emperor was more than ready to make over to Constantine the fortress of Selymbria on the Sea of Marmora, from where he could spy on the movements of his brother Demetrios. In March 1443 George Sphrantzes was made governor of Selymbria in his Master’s name”. In N. Iorga’s opinion, Demetrios would recover his appanage only the next year (*Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches*, I, p. 430).

¹⁰ Georgios Sphrantzes, *op. cit.*, loc. cit.; Peter Schreiner, *op. cit.*, I, p. 236 and II, p. 463–464.

¹¹ Constantin Marinescu, *La politique orientale d’Alphonse V d’Aragon roi de Naples (1416–1458)*, Barcelona, 1994, p. 140–141.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 132 and 170.

¹³ *Idem*, *Contribution à l’histoire des relations économiques entre l’Empire byzantin, la Sicile et le royaume de Naples de 1419 à 1453*, in: „Studi bizantini e neoellenici”, V, 1939 [= Atti del V Congresso internazionale di studi bizantini, Roma 20–26 settembre 1936, I], p. 217.

title went unnoticed by Romanian historians. Only in the early seventies, the Bulgarian historian Vassil Gjuzelev mentioned this title, in his attempt to reconstruct the history of the Bulgarian littoral of the Black Sea.¹⁴ Nonetheless, once more, the title itself was not interpreted...

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Most probably, as it is generally believed, Demetrios Palaiologos received the territory of Messembria, lying on the Black Sea shore, on the coast of the Propontida up to Selymbria, after his return from Florence. There, the Emperor "could keep an eye on him, for he was known to be bitterly opposed to the union of the churches, probably more from political motives than religious convictions."¹⁵ Moreover, being close to the capital was very convenient for someone who was looking forward to the Imperial succession. Sources indicate clearly that two of Emperor John VIII's brothers, who attempted to settle in the lands of Demetrios, namely Constantine and Theodore, were actually contenders to the throne. In addition, Chalkokondyles explicitly states that the siege of 1442, laid by Demetrios helped by the Ottomans, aimed the enthronement by force of Emperor's third brother: "However, after a while, when his brother-in-law Assan, a highly regarded man in Byzantium, *who seemed to help him in his attempt to take the throne*, could do nothing for him, he withdrew" (underlined by Șt. A.).¹⁶ Due to these circumstances, I believe that the title of "Despot of the Black Sea," held by Demetrios Palaiologos probably as early as 1440, should be related to his claims to the Imperial throne.

There are no sources on Despot Demetrios' whereabouts in 1445, when the latter sent an emissary to King Alfonso of Aragon and Naples. In any case, the messenger, "Vicencius of Lemeny," was a Westerner.¹⁷ One should not forget that, at some point, Demetrios went to the capital and, "not much later," he was arrested together with his brother-in-law, from the order of John VIII. However, he escaped and, in the middle of the night, sneaked into Pera and found refuge in the Genoese fortress, where he was able to keep and develop his western relations. According to Chalkokondyles, Demetrios reconciled with his brother, the Emperor, after this episode, and thus he "recovered his sovereignty over the land lying on the shores of the

¹⁴ Vassil Gjuzelev, *Chronicon Mesembriae (Notes sur l'histoire du littoral bulgare de la mer Noire pendant la période 1366–1448)* (in Bulgarian), „Godišnik na Sofiiskiiia Universitet – Istoriceski Facultet”, t. LXVI, 1972/1973, p. 186. The Bulgarian historian think that Demetrios ruled in Mesembria until December 1443. Then he reached Constantinople, where – following Chalkokondyles – for some time was imprisoned together with his brother-in-law Matthew Palaiologos Assan (not Pavel Assan, as Gjuzelev states). He succeeded to escape from jail and took refuge in Pera. Finally, Demetrios reconciled with his brother, John VIII, and received few islands as an appanage (see also Idem, in: *Bългарski srednovekovni gradove i kreposti*, I, *Gradove i kreposti po Dunav i Cerno More*, Varna, 1981, p. 351–352).

¹⁵ Donald M. Nicol, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁶ Laonic Chalcocondil, *op. cit.*, loc. cit.

¹⁷ From the island of Lemnos.

Black Sea.”¹⁸ However, by the close of 1444, a galiotta sent out from Constantinople to “la Mer Majour”, in order to gather information about the outcome of the battle of Varna, reached “ung chastel appelé Messemble, quy estoit à l’empereur.” And in the spring of 1445, the squadron of Sire de Wavrin that sailed to Messembria found there as sole authority, “ung seigneur grecq, capittaine dudit chastel de par l’empereur.” Thus, I agree with Vassil Gjuzelev, who believed that, at least at this moment Demetrios was not in Messembria.¹⁹ In any case, taking into account the implication of the title of “Despot of the Black Sea,” Demetrios’ message to King Alfonso could only be related to the attempt to find an ally willing to support his own interests.²⁰

The title of “Despot” is first mentioned in the twelfth century, during Manuel I Comnenos’ reign, in 1163, when the Emperor did not yet have a male heir, and he was considering bequeathing the throne to his eldest daughter Maria and to her husband. As Maria was engaged to Prince Béla, the son of King Géza II of Hungary and heir to the Hungarian throne, the title of “Despot” was bestowed upon the young prince in order to designate him as presumptive heir to the Byzantine throne.²¹

The word “despot”, δεσπότης, means “lord” (dominus). From the moment when “despot” became a title given to the heir to the Byzantine throne, it was considered the second in the Byzantine hierarchy, next to that of basileus. Later on, especially from the second half of the fourteenth century, this title – as already suggested – was “vulgarized”.²² Thus, it was frequently bestowed upon foreign princes, unrelated to the imperial family or upon foreign higher officials.²³ One should remember that in order to be a genuine “despot”, the title had to be conferred by the legitimate emperor. In addition, this title also implied the acceptance of a vassalic relationship. On the other hand, there were two categories of “despots”: despots merely holding the honorific title, and despots receiving in addition territorial appanages.²⁴ It should also be underlined that the title of „despot” was not hereditary. Thus, a despot could

¹⁸ Laonic Chalcocondil, *op. cit.*, loc.cit.

¹⁹ N. Iorga, *Cronica lui Wavrin și românii*, „Buletinul Comisiei Istorice a României”, VI, 1927, p. 98 and 102; see also Vassil Gjuzelev, *Chronicon Mesembriae*, p. 186–187.

²⁰ Finally, when he was Despot of Morea, Demetrios signed on 5th of February 1451 an alliance treaty with Alfonso V. This alliance was directed against the Ottomans. In case of victory, the Byzantine throne would be occupied by the king of Aragon; while Demetrios, as compensation, would receive the entire Hellada, Thesalia, Macedonia with Thessalonic, as well as the entire coast from Serres to Christopolis and Varna; however, if the king died first, the successor to the imperial throne was either the Despot or his son-in-law, previously chosen by the king himself (C. Marinescu, *La politique orientale*, p. 166–168).

²¹ G. Ostrogorsky, *Urum-Despotes. Die Anfänge der Despoteswürde in Byzanz*. „Byzantinische Zeitschrift”, 44 Bd., 1951, p.458–459.

²² The fundamental remains R. Guiland’s *Études sur l’histoire administrative de l’Empire byzantin. Le Despote*, ΔΕΣΠΟΤΗΣ, in « Revue des Études Byzantines », XVII, 1959, p. 62.

²³ See few examples *Ibidem*, pp. 77–78.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 65 and 77.

bequeath the territory of the despotate to his eldest son, but not the Byzantine title of despot.²⁵

“Despot” was a title generously distributed by the last Palaiologos to their descendants. Some of their possessions were very small, and the title holder was “the governor of a town rather than a territory.” R. Guiland gives as an example the Despot of Selymbria, Theodore Palaiologos, and Demetrios Palaiologos, as Despot of Messembria, “approximately in 1440.”²⁶ From the second example, it clearly appears that Guiland was unaware of Constantin Marinescu’s article published in 1939, and his reference to the title of “Despot of the Black Sea.”

The Black Sea was “a familiar sea” for the Byzantines. Pachymeres, for instance, provides very accurate information on the areas of the Pontic littoral of interest to him. Nonetheless he speaks of “places and peoples of political significance to Byzantium.”²⁷ Thus, I believe that the title held by Demetrios Palaiologos, even if it represents only a claim, reveals the Byzantine conception of the unity of the Pontic territory, with the sea as its core. There was a vast territory, undoubtedly, but so was the territory assigned by the title of “Despot of the West,” held by Nikephor Angelos.²⁸ Leaving aside the issue of the proximity to Constantinople, Demetrios Palaiologos, “Despot of the Black Sea,” with his headquarters at Messembria, was undoubtedly a credible contender to the Imperial throne and, in consequence, a prestigious political dialogue partner for sovereigns such as Alfonso V of Aragon and Naples.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 70–71.

²⁷ Angeliki E. Laiou, *On political geography: the Black Sea of Pachymeres*, in: *The Making of Byzantine History: Studies Dedicated to Donald M. Nicol*, edited by R. Beaton and Ch. Roueché, London, 1993, p. 121.

²⁸ R. Guiland, *op. cit.*, p. 71; Angeliki E. Laiou believes that the term “Occident” does not indicate the West of Europe, but only the Despotat of Epyrus and, “by extension”, the Serbian territory, in other words “the Western possessions of the Empire”.