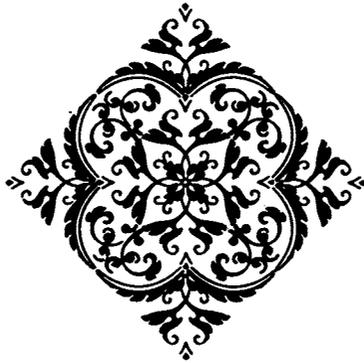


THE  
RELUCTANT  
EMPEROR

*A biography of John Cantacuzene,  
Byzantine Emperor and monk, c. 1295–1383*

DONALD M. NICOL



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## CONTENTS



<i>List of plates</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Acknowledgments and note on the text</i>	ix
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>Map: The Byzantine world</i>	xii
Introduction	i
1 The political and social background	5
2 The old order changes (1321–1328)	17
3 Emperor in waiting (1328–1341)	29
4 War for the throne (1341–1347)	45
5 Emperor of the Romans (1347–1351)	84
6 Emperor of the Romans (1351–1354)	113
7 Monk, historian and theologian (1354–1383)	134
8 His character, achievements and failures	161
<i>Select bibliography</i>	187
<i>Index</i>	198

## PLATES



*Frontispiece:* John VI Cantacuzene as monk (Paris *BN* cod. gr. 1242 f. 123)

*Between pages 114 and 115*

- 1 John VI Cantacuzene as Emperor and monk (Paris *BN* cod. gr. 1242 f. 123)
- 2 John VI Cantacuzene presiding over a synod of bishops (Paris *BN* cod. gr. 1242 f. 5)
- 3 The Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (detail from Paris, Musée du Louvre, cod. Ivoires 100, f. 2<sup>r</sup>)
- 4 Alexios Apokaukos as Grand Duke (Paris *BN* cod. gr. 2144 f. 11)
- 5 The Emperors Andronikos III, John VI Cantacuzene and John V Palaiologos (fifteenth-century portraits from Cod. Mutinensis gr. 122 f. 294<sup>v</sup>, Modena)
- 6 Stephen Dušan of Serbia and his wife Helena (fresco in Church of the Archangels, Lesnovo)
- 7 The Transfiguration (Paris *BN* cod. gr. 1242 f. 92<sup>v</sup>)
- 8 Orhan and his father Osman, Emirs of Bithynia (sixteenth-century portraits from a MS in Istanbul University Library, Cod. Yildiz 2653/261)

## INTRODUCTION



JOHN Cantacuzene, known in history as John VI, was Emperor of the Romans in Constantinople for only seven years, from 1347 to 1354. He was, almost without knowing it, a contemporary of Edward III of England, of Philip VI of France and of Andrea Dandolo, Doge of Venice. As a Byzantine he was more closely aware of being a contemporary and a neighbour of Stephen Dušan of Serbia and of Osman, the father of the Osmanli or Ottoman Turkish people. A man of varied talents as a soldier, scholar, statesman, theologian, Emperor and monk, he was unique in being the only Byzantine Emperor to record the events of his own career. His memoirs or autobiography constitute one of the most interesting and literate of all the many works of Byzantine history. In 1354 he abdicated and lived the last thirty years of his long life as a monk, a writer and a grey eminence behind the throne which he had occupied for so short a time. It is arguable that his influence was more lasting and beneficial as a monk and a theologian than it had been as an emperor and a man of the world. There has been no monograph on his life in English. An intriguing account in French, published in 1845, is mainly a critique and a historical evaluation of the man's own memoirs; and there is a studious analysis in German of the structure of the society in which he lived. A German translation of his memoirs with notes and commentary is currently in progress.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Val. Parisot, *Cantacuzène homme d'état et historien, ou examen critique des Mémoires de l'Empereur Jean Cantacuzène et des sources contemporaines* (Paris, 1845); G. Weiss, *Joannes Kantakuzenos – Aristokrat, Staatsmann, Kaiser und Mönch – in der Gesellschaftsentwicklung von Byzanz im 14. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden, 1969); *Johannes Kantakuzenos Geschichte*, translated with notes and commentary by G. Fatouros and T. Krischer (Stuttgart, 1982, 1986– ).

This book does not aim to present a social and political history of the Byzantine Empire in the fourteenth century. It is no more than a biography of a great and much-maligned and misunderstood man who lived through and tried as Emperor to direct the course of events during that century. The ghost of John Cantacuzene has been haunting me for about thirty years, for the idea of writing his life first came to me in 1964 during a year as a Visiting Fellow at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C. I found to my surprise that almost nothing was known about his father and very little about his family background. My researches into these problems led me far beyond my intentions and resulted in my compiling a genealogical and prosopographical study of all the known members of the Byzantine family of Kantakouzenos up to about 1460.<sup>2</sup> By far the largest entry in this work is inevitably that relating to John Cantacuzene. But it does not venture beyond the bounds of recording the bare facts of his life. This book attempts to put some flesh on the bones of those facts and to offer some speculation about the nature of the man and about his achievements and failures.

The major source for his life is naturally his own memoirs. These he completed about 1369 when he was living in retirement as a monk. Of almost equal importance and value, however, is the historical work of his older contemporary Nikephoros Gregoras, whose narrative spans the years from 1320 to 1359. Gregoras was a statesman and a scholar, qualities which he shared with his friend John Cantacuzene. Their disagreement, as was so often the case in Byzantine society, arose over a matter of theology. From being a sober and reliable historian of his age and a useful control over the statements of Cantacuzene, Gregoras degenerated into a ranting and obsessive polemicist. There are no other Greek historians of the fourteenth century to whom one might turn for a second opinion on the career of John Cantacuzene. It is an indication of the Byzantine failure of nerve in that age that after he and Gregoras laid down their pens about 1360 the long and

<sup>2</sup> D. M. Nicol, *The Byzantine Family of Kantakouzenos (Cantacuzenus) ca. 1100-1460. A Genealogical and Prosopographical Study* (Dumbarton Oaks Studies xi: Washington, D.C., 1968).

continuous tradition of the writing of contemporary history in Greek dried up. The historians who revived the art all lived in the fifteenth century, after their Byzantine world had been rudely brought to its end by the Ottoman Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453. Of these only the historian Doukas has much to say about the former Emperor and monk John Cantacuzene; and his facts are of necessity derived from hearsay or reminiscences of a past which he never knew, however much he may have mourned its loss.

The last of the long line of Byzantine historians, Laonikos Chalkokondyles, who died in 1490, has little to say and nothing to add about the life and career of Cantacuzene. The theme of his history is not so much the decline and fall of the Byzantine Empire as the origins and rise to power of the Ottoman Turks who had precipitated the fall. This is of some interest, for Cantacuzene was the first Emperor who came face to face with the leaders of the Osmanlis or Ottoman people and had to deal with them on personal terms. There are unfortunately no Ottoman histories or records of his time, even though his daughter became the wife of Osman's son. There is, however, one other unique Turkish source which throws some curious light on the man. It is a long verse epic relating to the Deeds (*Destān*) of another Turkish leader, Umur Pasha, who succeeded his father as Emir of Aydin (Smyrna) in 1334. The poet was called Enveri and he finished his poem in 1465. His hero Umur became a devoted personal friend of John Cantacuzene and remained so until he was killed in battle in 1348.

These are the only contemporary literary sources for his life and career. None of his own private correspondence exists. Those of his letters that have survived are all of an official or diplomatic nature. His name was known in western Europe, not least to the Popes at Avignon with whom he corresponded on ecclesiastical affairs. He was known more closely to the Italians of Venice and Genoa who caused him much trouble by their squabbles over the markets of Constantinople and trade in Byzantine waters. He claims that he could read and speak both Latin and Turkish. These were rare accomplishments for a Byzantine, or rather a 'Roman'. For as a citizen, an Emperor and a monk of what he proudly called the Empire of the Romans, Cantacuzene would hardly have understood the word

'Byzantine'. Nor did he call himself a Hellene or a Greek, although Greek was his language and he wrote it with a directness and simplicity of style uncommon among the Byzantine literati of his age. The four books of his memoirs on which much of this biography is based present a lucid, sometimes graphic, sometimes prolix and tedious, and frequently apologetic and enigmatic picture of their author. He had a vision of an empire smaller but more manageable than that ruled by his imperial predecessors, though none the less Roman. He had a hope, however naive or misguided, of coming to terms with the new Muslim world of Asia Minor. He fancied that he might win the trust and co-operation of western Christendom without compromising the Orthodoxy of his Christian faith and the special qualities of the culture into which he was born. He tried to save the ship of the Byzantine church and state before it plunged headlong into the final hundred years of its millennial existence.