
The topic of the relations between Byzantium and Venice has been dealt before in scholarly literature, though few times in a more or less complete way. In this book, Prof. Nicol examines almost all questionable aspects and attempts to give a valid opinion on most issues of this troubling relationship. Chronologically, he covers the period from the early years of the Middle Ages right to the fall of Constantinople in 1453. His approach is characterized by a desire to avoid any possible vagueness while describing and commenting on the most dubious events.

In the twenty two chapters of the book the diplomatic relations between the maritime Venetian democracy and the Byzantine empire are presented beginning in theory from the 5th century AD (chapter 1) but actually from the 9th century AD (chapter 2). In the following chapters 3-8, the writer is engaged in the description of the dominating role of Venice in Eastern Aegean, the relations of Venice Byzantium as determined by the chrysobulls released by the various emperors, the crusades, especially the fourth one in which led to the fall of Constantinople in 1204, and the role of the venetian people in that last event.

In chapters 9-11, he deals with the activity of the westerners in the area of occupied Romania, Venetians included, the development of Epiros, Nikaea, Trebizond, the recapture of Constantinople by Michael VIII Palaiologos and his foreign policy. Chapters 12-15 are devoted to the dispute between Venice and Genoa on the advantages and profits from trade in the area of the declining Byzantine empire (1285-1350). Also, the internal conflict inside the House of Palaiologoi and the involvement of John VI Kantakouzenos and, last, the spread of the Turks in Anatolia.

Chapters 16 constitutes a concise account of the Byzantine - veneto-genoese relation and the importance of sea-trade for Venice. The writer describes the venetian community in Constantinople and the growth of the venetian trade in the Black Sea area.

In chapters 17-20 the writer returns to his familiar method of describing the veneto-genoese dispute over the island of Tenedos in Northern Aegean, the conquest of the Balkan area by the Turks, the vain attempts of the Byzantine emperor to secure help against the Turkish danger and the internal intrigues inside the imperial court among the Byzantine princes in connection with the involvement of the Turks and Venetians.

The belated reactions of the western powers against the Turks and its inevitable disastrous result of the siege, fall and occupation of Constantinople is the subject of chapter 21. The last chapter deals with the subsequent fall of the small «Byzantine» states. The work
is completed by an attempt on a general criticism on the veneto-byzantine relations, an introduction to the Greek quarter in Venice, the Greek studies in Italy and their importance concerning the Renaissance world.

Through the 422 pages of the book, Prof. D. M. Nicol unveils the history of more than five hundred years, mainly in the area of eastern Mediterranean. It is inevitable, that the facts required for presentation and examination are numerous, and in more than one way, extremely complicated, since the fate of Byzantium has been always determined by both its own decisions and the political act of the other eastern and western powers.

The division of the book in nineteen basic chapters and three complementary ones has been quite successful. In chapters 2 to 15 and 17 to 21, the writer spans the events in detail showing a solid knowledge of the source that created them. Every chapter lasts no more than twenty or so pages (rarely exceeds that limit like in chapters 8, 10, 11, 20 and 21). His paragraphs are between half a page to one page long so as to avoid exhausting the reader's patience.

Generally, a plain style and a lack of mannerism characterizes the narrative of Prof. Nicol. Such an attempt is required in order to describe the complexity and diversity of the events during five centuries. Most of the times their sequence is logical, their structure tight and condensed due to their large number and the lack of space allowed for their description. Obscure terms are avoided and the account is subtle without any emotional overtone even though the reader occasionally cannot help but experience a feeling of excitement. And certainly, no reader can accuse Prof. Nicol for showing any persisting interest on any specific time period, except perhaps in chapter 20 when he deals with the Ferrara - Florence Synod.

However, the vast number of events and conditions necessary to be presented here unavoidably leads to certain faults. Thus, occasionally the narrative becomes loose, (as in chapter 14 that deals with the Turkish case), and a gradual sense of fatigue overtakes the actual account that is reflected on the reader as well, especially after chapter 14. It appears that the writer himself is aware of that and in an attempt to face it he introduces the supplementary chapter 16, where he no longer examines the facts themselves but rather he is preoccupied with their interpretation and historical importance in the development of the future of the two states. He also looks upon the culture of the two areas of his work. By doing so he is able to ease off the tension due to the nature of the events and smoothly to prepare us for the last act of the «drama».

Apart from these, the heavy load of work and the fact that he is bound to fit such a great number of historical cases that occur during a great period of time in a relatively restricted area have not allowed him enough space for neither constructive criticism nor for
adequately showing the internal relations between these cases except, perhaps in chapters 3, 11, 15 and 20.

The description of the relations between the western powers inside the Byzantine empire occasionally wears out the reader as well. Unquestionably, the role of the western powers in Anatolia has been quite influential originally during the period after the first crusade. Following the fall of Constantinople in 1204 the western lords get involved and act inside the Byzantine territory to such an extent that eventually constitute its most significant element. Here again, Prof. Nicol proves himself to be a true master of the art of narration and the proper presentation of the inter-state relations, however complicated they may be (chapters 15, 17-21). Unfortunately, even at this point the reader gets tired by the amount of events one has to «swallow» while at other times perhaps he feels unconsciously that he is directed away from the main topic which steel remains to be «the diplomatic and cultural relations between Byzantium and Venice».

As far as the cultural relations between Byzantium and Venice are concerned, we can only say that this is an area that lacks a truly adequate presentation. Only few elements of cultural interaction are presented and these in general lines in short paragraphs (chapters 2, 5, 6, 13, 22). References on customs, traditions, language, every day life, work and religion of both worlds are omitted as well as everything concerning the relations between the former Byzantine areas (e.g. Methoni, Coroni, Crete, Euboia, Aegean Islands, e.t.c.) and Byzantium, relations that on certain occasions became especially tense (e.g. during the reign of Michael VIII Palaiologos with Venetian Crete). Undoubtedly, due to the restricted space available, some topics had to be omitted but especially for the issue of the direct/indirect cultural interchange it would have been a good idea to include one more chapter in order to unite all the scattered information which appears all over the book.

What is also characteristic is the absence of the human factor. All individuals who appear to have been instrumental in the course of history they actually represent higher ideological and political institutions and forms that literally eliminate the human factor. Unfortunately, a few exceptions exist like in chapters 7 (description of a Venetian merchant), 13 (Patriarch Athanasios and the role of Eastern church), 15 (comparison between the Doge Andrea Dandolo and the Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos). It might also have been necessary to include another chapter, similar in structure to chapter 16 between chapters 8 and 9, where the history of the veneto-Byzantine relation until 1204 could be broadly described so that the reader would be better prepared for the rest of the chapters up to chapter 16 and the large amount of the facts that cover the period 1204-1350 and naturally cause a non-deliberate weariness.

Prof. Nicol appears to be briefly informed on the sources and the bibliography. The exhaustive search of both the western and eastern sources and the presentation of the
conclusions in combination with the processing of the data and the information-level concerning not only the earlier but also the contemporary bibliography create a sense of certainty regarding the writer. A sense obvious in every page of the text, that is transferred in an automatic and unaffected way to the reader even when the most difficult and obscure events of the period in question are concerned.

In conclusion, the mental creation of Prof. Nicol is one of the most significant writings of the last decade in the area of both the diplomatic relations between the Byzantine empire and Venice and the foreign policy of the two states. With a sense of reliability, prudence and respect towards the goal he has dedicated himself for decades, Prof. Nicol offers us a masterpiece. His book is a true heritage to Byzantine history and to theoretical sciences in general and can be used as a great tool not only in the hands of a university professor or a scholar but also in those of a student and even in those of a non-specialist reader who might wish to learn about the relations of the two countries on a more challenging level. We hold in our hands an excellent edition that was truly missing from the bibliography of the Byzantine historiography and which really covered a void that existed for years.