

FROM BYZANTIUM TO THE WEB: THE ENDURANCE OF JOHN III DOUKAS VATATZES' LEGACY*

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Besides Constantine the Great, the only other Byzantine emperor to be venerated by the Orthodox Church until the present day is the Nicene sovereign, John III Doukas Vatatzes. Considered by some a «father of the Greeks», Vatatzes has become an important part of modern Greek political discourse as well. Outlining the origin, evolution and diffusion of the sanctioned cult of John III as a saint-emperor, this paper suggests that the figure of St. Vatatzes has played an important role in shaping modern Greek identity, and aims to initiate further research on the topic so that the extraordinary endurance of his legacy will be better understood.

Keywords: John III Vatatzes, Hagiography, Byzantine imperial sainthood, Modern Greek identity.

While many communities celebrate heroes of their national past in contemporary popular and political culture, there is a ‘celebrity’ whose name still occupies the front pages of newspapers, local religious ceremonies, and popular culture in Greece¹: in his native Thrace, John III Doukas Vatatzes (r. 1222–1254) not only has a church dedicated to him in Didymoteicho, but since 2010 is also celebrated every fourth of November during the *Vatatzeia* festivals organized by the local Metropolitan in his honor. What makes this Nicene ruler such an enduring and arresting character? How can we interpret the ‘modern Greek life’ of this Byzantine figure? To better understand the dynamics of his long-lasting presence in political-social-historical issues, and to clarify some of the aspects of his survival hitherto misunderstood, I will recall some stages of the trajectory that has led John III to present day, through his continuous rebirths, from the margins during Byzantium to the heart of Greece in modern times.

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¹ See, for instance, the newspaper *Ελεύθερη Ώρα*: «Ιωάννης Βατάτζης και διάλυση της Τουρκίας τους επόμενους 18 μήνες» (November 11, 2013; front page headline), «Ιωάννης Βατάτζης προ των πυλών της Κωνσταντινούπολης» (December 23, 2013; front page headline) and «Τελειωμένα τα πολιτικά συστήματα σε Ελλάδα-Τουρκία! ‘Ιωάννης Βατάτζης’ εν όψει!» (January 8, 2014).

In order to further discuss the phenomenon of John III Vatatzes as an emperor-saint of Byzantium, it is necessary to explore his canonization and the ways in which his worship took shape throughout the centuries. I will begin by outlining the main steps of the sovereign's afterlife, reevaluating some of the neglected literature on him.²

It is said by the chronicler George Akropolites that, perceiving the arrival of his own death, Vatatzes hastened toward his beloved imperial residence of Nymphaeum, a few tens of kilometers inland from the city of Smyrna.³ He died there on November 3, 1254, at the age of sixty-two, and his coffin was buried in the nearby monastery of Sosandra, which the emperor himself had founded on the heights overlooking the city of Magnesia *ad Sipylum*.⁴ Already in the second half of the thirteenth century, two different but complementary representations of Vatatzes' figure derived from this historical profile.⁵

The first was created by and for court propaganda, and aimed to overcome the complicated events that followed the prosperous years of John III. In fact, his son and successor Theodore II (r. 1254–1258) not only seemed to neglect government affairs, preferring literature and culture, but also died suddenly after a brief four-year reign.⁶ The throne was then left in the hands of the young John IV (r. 1258–1261), and immediately attracted the attention of those who strove for

² The texts considered in this study are George of Pelagonia's Βίος τοῦ ἁγίου Ἰωάννου βασιλέως τοῦ Ἐλεήμονος (BHG 933; edited in A. HEISENBERG, *Kaiser Johannes Batatzes der Barmherzige. Eine Mittellgriechische Legende*, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 14/1905, pp. 160–233, in part. pp. 193–233), the anonymous post-Byzantine Βίος τοῦ ἁγίου βασιλέως Ἰωάννου τοῦ Βατάτση τοῦ Ἐλεήμονος τοῦ ἐν Μαγνησίᾳ (discovered and “metaphrased” by Nikodemos the Hagiorite and published in K. AGATHANGELOS, *Asmatikḗ akolouthia tou hagiou Vasileōs Iōannou tou Vatatsē tou Eleēmonos tou en Magnēsia*, En Kōnstantinoupolei: Typois Anatolikou Asteros, 1872, pp. 30–56), and Nikodemos the Hagiorite's Μνήμη τοῦ ἁγίου, ἐνδόξου, θεοστέπτου βασιλέως Ἰωάννου Βατάτση τοῦ Ἐλεήμονος, τοῦ ἐν Μαγνησίᾳ (in AGATHANGELOS, *Asmatikḗ akolouthia...*, *cit.*, pp. 18–20), whose new commented editions lie at the heart of my current research.

³ *History 52* (GEORGIUS ACROPOLITA, *Opera*, I–II, ed. by A. HEISENBERG and corr. by P. WIRTH, Stuttgartiae: In aedibus Teubneri, 1978 [*Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana*], I p. 102 ll. 7–9; translation from GEORGIUS ACROPOLITA, *The History. Introduction, translation and commentary*, trans. by R. MACRIDES, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2007 [*Oxford Studies in Byzantium*], p. 270): «μόγις γοῦν ἀνέπνευσεν, ἠλλοιωμένος τὸ χρῶμα. Καὶ ἔσπευσε καταλαβεῖν τὸ Νύμφαιον πρὸ τῆς βαΐοφόρου κυριακῆς», *he breathed with difficulty and regained consciousness, but his complexion had changed. He sought then to reach Nymphaion and to arrive before Palm Sunday*.

⁴ A new, convincing identification of the monastery's ruins is presented in E. MITSIOU, *The monastery of Sosandra: a contribution to its history, dedication and localisation*, *Bulgaria Mediaevalis*, 2/2011, pp. 665–683.

⁵ The different literary representations of Vatatzes have been already analyzed in L. M. CIOLFI, *John III Vatatzes: History, Myth and Propaganda*, in M. LAU – C. FRANCHI – M. DI RODI (eds.), *Landscapes of Power. Selected Papers from the XV Oxford University Byzantine Society International Graduate Conference*, Oxford-Bern-Berlin-Bruxelles-Frankfurt am Main-New York-Wien: Lang, 2014 (*Byzantine and Neohellenic Studies*, 10), pp. 273–288.

⁶ See I. GIARENIS, *Hē sugkrotēsē kai hē edraiosē tēs autokratōrias tēs Nikaias*, Athēna, 2008 (*Ethiko Idruma Ereunōn – Institutou Byzantinōn Ereunōn. Monografies*, 12).

power at all costs. Among them was the future emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos (r. 1258–1282), a member of the aristocracy and leading figure of the Nicene court: he acted immediately, during Theodore II's funeral itself, killing the guardian of the royal scion, George Mouzalon (1220–1258), and obliging patriarch Arsenios Autoreianos (1255–1260 and 1261–1267) to crown him as co-emperor at the end of the same year.

Those faithful to the Laskarid dynasty raised their voices, especially when the new ruler decided to replace that patriarch with the more pliable Nikephoros, and ordered the blinding of John IV, who was at that point definitely out of power games.⁷ Using propaganda, then, the “new Constantine”⁸ tried to gain the favor of his subjects, which neither the overwhelming victory at Pelagonia (1259) nor the recapture of the capital (1261) had granted him. The Palaiologos, who had already attempted to marry Vatatzes' young widow, Anna/Constance of Hohenstaufen, so as to legitimize his aspirations, worked to connect himself to the Laskarids in the court's literary products, depicting himself as the direct descendant and heir of the Nicene sovereign.⁹ Hereafter, even the burial and the promotion of John IV's veneration in the Constantinopolitan former imperial monastery of St. Demetrius, near Kontoskalion, during Andronicus II's kingdom (r. 1282–1328) seems to be part of Palaeologan long-lasting strategy to please their political opponents through the public recognition of the virtues of the latter's own favorite and his offspring.¹⁰

At the same time, however, a second trend emerged: to wit, the exaltation of John III's philanthropy and mercy enveloped his figure in a mythical aura, making him a legendary character close to the figure of a saint.¹¹ In the reconquered

⁷ Despite many attempts, Michael VIII was not able to suppress that discontent. The so-called ‘Arsenian schism’ between Arsenites and Josephists (from the name of the patriarch who gave absolution to the ruler for his crimes) lasted until 1315, when patriarch Nephon I proposed a definitive reconciliation; as it has been pointed out, such unrest was perceived «as part of the political opposition to the upstart Palaiologan dynasty by Laskarid supporters» (cf. A. M. TALBOT, *Arsenites*, in A. P. KAZHDAN – A. M. TALBOT – A. CUTLER – T. E. GREGORY – N. P. ŠEVČENKO [eds.], *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, I, New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 188).

⁸ See R. MACRIDES, *The New Constantine and the New Constantinople – 1261?*, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 6/1980, pp. 13–41. The new emperor was concerned also by the architectural renovation of the reconquered capital, as described in A. M. TALBOT, *The restoration of Constantinople under Michael VIII*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 47/1993, pp. 243–261.

⁹ Refer to CIOLFI, *John III Vatatzes...*, cit., pp. 280–285. On Anna/Constance of Hohenstaufen see C. DIEHL, *Figures byzantines*, II, Paris: Armand Colin, 1908, pp. 207–225.

¹⁰ The grave was visited and kissed by the Russian traveler Stephen of Novgorod in 1349: he mentioned the sepulcher in his diaries as that of «holy Emperor Laskariasaf» (18, in G. P. MAJESKA, *Russian travelers to Constantinople in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries*, Washington [DC]: Dumbarton Oaks research library and collection, 1984 [*Dumbarton Oaks studies*, 19], pp. 38–39). As I. Ševčenko opined, that name could preserve the monastic name, Joasaph, chosen by John IV when becoming monk (*ibidem*, p. 267).

¹¹ The most recent contribution on the issue A. PAPAYIANNI, *Emperor John III Doukas Vatatzes: an orthodox saint*, *Byzantinos Domos*, 14/2004–2005, pp. 27–31: the scholar only briefly locates the canonization of Vatatzes in the post-Byzantine period (p. 30), focusing on the sovereign's Orthodoxy (p. 27). Both D. J. CONSTANTELOS, *Emperor John Vatatzes' Social Concern. Basis for Canonization*, *Kleronomia*, 4/1972, pp. 92–104 and R. MACRIDES, *Saints and Sainthood in the Early*

Constantinople, for example, Nikephoros Blemmydes and George Akropolites touched upon these extraordinary characteristics of his, albeit with nuanced tones and completely different purposes. According to Blemmydes' encomiastic streak, the Nicene sovereign outclassed all his predecessors:

«Ἰωάννης οὗτος ἦν ὁ δεδοξασμένος ὑπὲρ πολλοὺς βασιλέας ὑπὸ Θεοῦ»
*it was this John whom God glorified above many other emperors;*¹²

Akropolites was instead polemical, using Vatatzes' image to criticize the Nicene emperor's weak progeny in Michael VIII's eyes and consequently gain the latter's favor:

«τοιούτος γὰρ πρὸς τοὺς ὑπηκόους ἐφάνη καὶ οὕτως τοῖς ὑπὸ χειρᾶς
 ἐχρήσατο, ὡς πάντας τὸν πατέρα μακαρίζειν καὶ βασιλέα»
*for [Theodore II] was so bad of such a character to his subjects and he so
 treated those under his control that they all called his father, the emperor,
 blessed.*¹³

More than this, the same kind of devotional love inflamed by his legend promoted a deep worship far from Constantinople, in the peripheral region of Lydia.¹⁴ It is easy to imagine that the veneration of John III, known probably already *in vita* with the nickname of «the Merciful»,¹⁵ gave rise in a short time to liturgical celebrations on his death anniversary and homage at his tomb in Sosandra. When the emperor's coffin was then transferred to Magnesia under the

Palaiologan Period, in S. HECKEL (ed.), *The Byzantine Saint. Fourteenth spring symposium of Byzantine studies*, London: The Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1981, pp. 67–87, in part. pp. 69–71, reported the early development of Vatatzes' cult and its connection to Constantinople. Notwithstanding, I believe that connection to the Capital is more relevant for the case of John IV (cfr. again MACRIDES, *Saints and Sainthood...*, cit., pp. 71–73 and, more extensively, T. SHAWCROSS, *In the Name of the True Emperor: Politics of Resistance after the Palaiologan Usurpation*, *Byzantinoslavica*, 66/2008, pp. 203–227).

¹² *Autobiographia* 1.12 (NICEPHORUS BLEMMEYDES, *Autobiographia sive curriculum vitae necnon epistula universalior*, ed. by J. A. MUNITIZ, Brepols-Leuven: Turnhout – Leuven University press, 1984 [*Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca*, 13], p. 8 ll. 8–9; translation from NICEPHORUS BLEMMEYDES, *A partial account*, trans. by J. A. MUNITIZ, Leuven: Spicilegium sacrum lovaniense, 1988 [*Spicilegium sacrum lovaniense. Études et documents*, 48], p. 49).

¹³ *History* 52 (ed. HEISENBERG and WIRTH, I p. 105 ll. 12–14; translation from MACRIDES, p. 271).

¹⁴ Strong ties existed between John III and that region and its inhabitants. In particular: his ancestors had demonstrated there their military abilities during the Komnenian military campaigns and, since then, the Thrakesian theme had been the main political support for that aristocratic family from Adrianople; for that strategic area Vatatzes had such interests and a personal inclination that he moved his court from Nicaea to the winter palace of Nymphaeum as well as promoting the activities of Magnesia's mint, to which he also transferred the imperial treasury (reasons that could have determined the opposition between the two main centers of the Empire of Nicaea; see below).

¹⁵ Two notes written by one of the anonymous readers in the margins of Akropolites' *History*, transmitted in the fourteenth-century manuscript Vat. gr. 166, demonstrated the success – and probably the wide diffusion till the capital – of this nickname. These are: at *History* 19, «† Ἰω(άνν)ου τοῦ Ἐλεήμονος : » (f. 50v, external margin) and, at *History* 21, «† ἀρχ(ή) Ἰω(άννου) τοῦ Ἐλεήμονος» (f. 51v, external margin).

increasing threat of Ottoman campaigns, the city became the center of Vatatzes' veneration.

The first and only hint to the beginning of this local cult dates to the end of 1303. Magnesia was abandoned to its fate by Michael IX (r. 1294/5–1320) when, during a siege, the brother of the *kastrophylax* Philanthropenos – whose name is unknown to us –, deaf-mute from birth, received a revelation by which he was miraculously healed: thanks to him, the citizens could know that the lamp that was frequently spotted at night wandering along the city walls was in fact the Nicene emperor. The historian George Pachymeres reported:

«βλέπει οὖν ἐκεῖνος προσμένων οὐ λαμπάδα ἡμμένην, ἀλλ' ἄνδρα βασιλικῶς ἑσταλμένον, τὰς μὲν αὐτῶν φυλακὰς οἶον ἐξουθενούντα αὐτὸν δὲ τὴν τῆς φυλακῆς ἐπιτροπὴν ἔχειν λέγοντα. [...] Προσπαίει δὲ πᾶσιν, ὅπερ καὶ ἀληθὲς ἦν, ἢ τοῦ βασιλέως ἐκείνου τοῦ ἐλεήμονος Ἰωάννου, καθὼς ἂν ὁ Λυδὸς εἶποι, ἐπιστασία, ἐν ᾗ παρὰ Θεοῦ φυλάττεσθαι ἐπιστεύοντο»
*while waiting, the boy saw not a lighted torch but a regally dressed man, who scorned the guards and said that the task of guarding was up to him. [...] The guardianship of that famous emperor John the Merciful – a term that the Lydians might have used – to which they were entrusted by God for their protection, astounded everyone. And this was true indeed.*¹⁶

Vatatzes became thus the divine protector of the Hermus Valley, the patron saint of those defenseless subjects. Nonetheless, this consideration does not mean that in the meantime there was an official recognition of his cult by the Church hierarchy in Constantinople; no documents exist that attest a possible canonization of his person during the Byzantine period.¹⁷

However, in George of Pelagonia's *Life of the Emperor St. John the Merciful*, which was in fact a political pamphlet, a fierce critique of the contemporary ruling class, and a manifesto of the author's propositions for reform – and not a real hagiography as it is usually misinterpreted¹⁸ –, it is possible to read between the

¹⁶ *History* 11.15 (GEORGIUS PACHYMERES, *Relations historiques*, I–V, ed. and trans. by A. FAILLER, Paris: Institut français d'études byzantines, 1984–2000 [*Corpus fontium historiae Byzantinae*, 24], IV p. 441 ll. 4–6 and 11–3).

¹⁷ For example, the *Eortologion* of Constantinople does not include the emperor's name in his feast day (see M. GEDEON, *Byzantinon Eortologion. Mnēmai tōn apo tou 4 mehri mesōn tou 15 aiōnos eortazomenōn agiōn en Kōnstantinoupolei*, En Kōnstantinoupolei: Ellēnikos Filologikos Syllogos, 1899, pp. 184–185).

¹⁸ Although modern scholars tend to interpret the *Βίος τοῦ ἁγίου Ἰωάννου βασιλέως τοῦ Ἐλεήμονος*, composed by George of Pelagonia in the third quarter of the fourteenth century, as one of the key-elements for ratifying the cult of Vatatzes, this work is not a hagiography at all. This *Bíos* only served to present Vatatzes as a reference model of excellence for George's political goal (see L. M. CIOLFI, *Quel rôle pour la Vie de Jean III Vatatzes ?*, in E. GUILHEM [ed.], *V^{es} Rencontres annuelles des doctorants en études byzantines 2012*, Porphyra, 2013 [*Confronti su Bisanzio*, 1], pp. 35–39 and IDEM, *Giorgio di Pelagonia. Un nuovo sguardo sulla crisi dell'era paleologa*, in R. ANGIOLILLO – E. ELIA – E. NUTI [eds.], *Crisi. Immagini, interpretazioni e reazioni nel mondo greco, latino e bizantino*, Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2015 [*Culture antiche. Studi e testi*, 29], pp. 97–108). Beyond its aesthetic and literary value, the importance of the *Life* resides also in the fact that it has

lines a subtext derived from the cult materials on John III, which were very likely gathered over time in Magnesia and circulated throughout the Eastern provinces of the fourteenth century imperial territory.¹⁹ This is evident from the recurring references to the religiosity of the sovereign, who showed his constant concern not only for his own spirituality but also for the patrimony of the Church, and it emerges as well in the account of the miracle with which the *Bíos* ends. Vatatzes' body, thrown contemptuously from the walls of Magnesia by the conquerors of the city, healed the paraplegia of a naive Muslim boy who had touched it while searching for treasure, and finally led him to convert to the Orthodox faith:

«τοῦ δὲ τιμίου σώματος θίξαντι (ἠγνόει δὲ ὅτι εἶη) εὐθὺς ἦτε πάσχουσα χεὶρ ἐκινήθη τό τε πρόσωπον εἰς τὸ καθεστηκός μετηνέχθη καὶ ὁ ποὺς εὐκίνητος ἦν. Ἄρτιος δὲ πρὸς τοὺς οἰκειοὺς ἐπανελθὼν τὸ συμβεβηκός διηγείται. Καὶ μαθὼν ὅτου εἶη τὸ σῶμα, τῆς ἐκείνου γίνεται πίστεως, πολλὴν ἀβελτηρίαν τῆς πατρώας κατεγνωκώς»
*as he touched the venerable body, though ignorant of what it was, his afflicted hand moved immediately, his face returned to its proper form, and his foot became able to walk. Healed, he returned to his family and told them what had happened. And once he learned whose body it was, he converted to his religion, condemning the great folly of his paternal faith.*²⁰

A pious woman then rescued the abandoned emperor's body, installing it in her home, and around it there formed the nucleus of a small place of worship.

Two elements must be remarked upon: the consideration of the emperor's remains as relics already at this point, and the existence of a little chapel dedicated exclusively to John III – and containing his icon –, which survived until 1922 along the right aisle of Turkish Manisa St. Athanasius cathedral.²¹

survived in the autograph author's draft, as I have demonstrated through the comparison of its script with another note by George, whose writing was certified also by the attentive paleographical eye of John Chortasmenos (1370–1437): the version by George of Pelagonia's hand is in Vat. gr. 579, ff. 229r–250v; the note used for the paleographical comparison is in the Aristotle Ambr. gr. 512 (f. Iv), already pointed out by G. PRATO, *Un autografo di Teodoro II Lascaris imperatore di Nicea?*, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik*, 30/1981, pp. 249–258. See L. M. CIOLFI, *Georges de Pélagonie en son bureau. Les différentes étapes de rédaction du Bíos τοῦ ἁγίου Ἰωάννου*, paper given at the round table “*L'auteur à Byzance : de l'écriture à son public*” (convener: P. Odorico; 23rd International Congress of Byzantine Studies [Belgrade, 22-27 August 2016]).

¹⁹ This phenomenon can be assumed when comparing George of Pelagonia's text with the anonymous post-byzantine *Life of St. John Vatatzes*, in which emerge many features of a proper liturgical text (see below).

²⁰ *Life of St. John* 43 (ed. HEISENBERG, p. 232 l. 36 – p. 233 l. 3).

²¹ A slight reference to this place of worship is in G. I. PAPADOPOULOS, *Symbolai eis tēn historian tēs par'hēmin ekklēsiastikēs mousikēs*, En Athēnais: Tupographeion kai Bibliopōleion Kousoulinou kai Athanasiadou, 1890, p. 267: «σώζεται τὸ λείψανον αὐτοῦ ἐν τινι κομπολόει τῆς Ἐφέσου, ἢ δὲ εἰκὼν αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ περικαλλεῖ ναῶ τοῦ ἁγίου Ἀθανασίου τῆς πόλεως Μαγνησίας»; see also O. VATIDOU, *Hē christianikotēta tōn Tourkōn kai hoi Hellēnes tēs Mikrasias*, Athēna: n.p., 1956, p. 39 and D. J. CONSTANTELOS, *Poverty, Society and Philanthropy in the Late Mediaeval Greek World*, New Rochelle (NY): A.D. Caratzas, 1992 (*Hellenism, ancient, mediaeval, modern*, 8), pp. 64–65.

From the evidence offered so far, we can assume that the official and formal recognition of John III's saintliness was a phenomenon which took place outside the political borders of Byzantium.²² In order to determine the dynamics and purposes of this case, then, it is important to explore the position of the Christian communities of Western Anatolia under Ottoman rule.

Already in the late thirteenth-early fourteenth century, problems in the Byzantine Western provinces diverted the emperors' attention away from Asia Minor, where the Ottoman armies advanced easily and consolidated their positions. According to Pachymeres' *History*, the consequent dangers in everyday life pushed the native subjects who survived the slaughters to abandon their land: grabbing the bare essentials, some fled to the west and to the Aegean islands facing the coast (Tenedos, Lesbos and, above all, Chios);²³ others, outraged by the lack of protection from their rulers and inspired by an anti-Constantinopolitan feeling, even decided to pass voluntarily over to the enemy.²⁴ The invasion of Tamerlane (r. 1370–1405) at the end of the century was a further and decisive impulse to such migration.

Those Byzantines who remained in Lydia were at first part of the Beylik of Saruhan, where they could live without major deprivation and participate in the urban revival that occurred in the 1360s and 1370s;²⁵ subsequently they were ruled by the Ottoman Turks, who captured this area of Anatolia during the years of Mehmed I (r. 1413–1421). Notwithstanding, Magnesia continued to enjoy a certain wellbeing and privileged position in the region, and so did the few local Christians who, having joined their metropolis to that of Ephesus (1469–1470), acquired greater importance than their neighboring coreligionists in Smyrna.²⁶

²² As it has already been implied by G. Dagron. Even if arguing that Vatatzes was almost assimilated to a saint, the French scholar softens his claim, pointing out that «son éloge ressemble à un panégyrique impérial, que sa *Vie* fut écrite au XVIII^e siècle, que son office, composé par Nicodème l'Hagiorite, est plus récente encore, et qu'il s'agit d'un empereur de Nicée, non de Constantinople» (G. DAGRON, *Empereur et prêtre. Étude sur le césaropapisme byzantin*, Paris: Gallimard, 1996 [*Bibliothèque des histoires*], p. 163). As D. Constantelos has noted (CONSTANTELOS, *Emperor John...*, cit., pp. 94–95), there were some obstacles – immoral behavior and disobedience towards the Church hierarchy – which could have prevented, if ever, an official sanction of the cult.

²³ *History* 10.18 (ed. FAILLER, IV p. 345 ll. 11–12): «καὶ ὁ λαὸς ὁ μὲν κατεσφάττετο, ὁ δ' ἀπανίστατο φθάνων, καὶ οἱ μὲν πρὸς νήσους τὰς ἐγγιζούσας, οἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν δύσιν διαπεραιούμενοι, διεσφάζοντο», *some people were butchered, some other fled earlier. They saved themselves: a group moving to the opposite islands, the other to West.*

²⁴ See in particular E. A. ZACHARIDOU, *Note sur la population de l'Asie Mineure turque au XIV^e siècle*, *Byzantinische Forschungen*, 12/1987, pp. 223–231, in part. pp. 228–229.

²⁵ See R. P. LINDNER, *Anatolia 1300–1451*, in K. FLEET (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Turkey. 1: Byzantium to Turkey, 1071–1453*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 102–137, in part. pp. 110–111.

²⁶ For instance, sultan Murad II decided to retire himself in Magnesia, after having yielded the scepter to his son Mehmed II in 1444; moreover, the role of the city as traditional training center for Ottoman princes granted its inhabitants the presence of royal retinue and exemption from some taxes. For the condition of the Christians see A. PAPADOPOULOS-KERAMEUS, *Magnësia hē hupo Sipulō kai hai mētropoleis Ephesou kai Smurnēs*, *Deltion tēs Historikēs kai Ethnologikēs Hetaireias tēs Hellados*, 2/1885, pp. 650–660.

With them John III's memory continued to live after the fall of the Byzantine Empire. To this historical moment, which constituted a new beginning to their community in Asia Minor both on the islands and on the mainland, is associated a witness of the November 5 *akolouthia* dedicated to the martyrs St. Galaktion and St. Episteme and to St. John the emperor, copied during fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by an anonymous hand on the ff. 38v–47r of the codex Leimonos 124 (a *Menaion* for November) of the monastery of St. Ignatius on the island of Lesbos.²⁷ In the thirty-five sections dedicated to the Nicene sovereign, in fact, the bond with his land appears clearly by repeated references to the miraculous healings that took place at his tomb. The three fragments of the same liturgical hymns at f. 219v of the *British Library Burney 54* (an *Euchologion*) make this connection even more clear:²⁸ not only was this manuscript penned mainly by the metropolitan of Ephesus Sebastianos Argyropoulos (he left his subscription in the volume on May 19, 1573), but also the title associates the text clearly with main center of Lydia.²⁹

Below I offer a comparative transcription of the verses in both the Lesbiacus and the Burney codices:³⁰

²⁷ The edition of this text has been announced as part of the forthcoming study by C. Dendrinou and A. Spanos, *An Unpublished Akolouthia on the Emperor John III Vatatzes*; however, it is now part of the hymnographic dossier on the emperor published in PH. DIMITRAKOPOULOS, *Ho anamenomenos hagios Basileus Iōannēs Batatzēs ho Eleēmōn*, Athēna: Ekdoseis Armos, 2016. Here, I restrict myself in dating the codex century on the basis of both paleographic and watermarks comparisons.

²⁸ On this codex see D. POLEMIS, *Symbolai eis tēn historian tēs mētropoleōs Ephesou kata ton dekatan ekton aiōna*, *Epetēris hetaireias Buzantinōn Spoudōn*, 45/1981–1982, pp. 313–363, in part. pp. 313–328.

²⁹ The title refers to John III as to «the new Merciful», a possible attempt to distinguish this saint from other homonymous characters (“the Merciful” was in fact an honorific epithet associated also with other Byzantine saints; see I. POLEMIS, *The speech of Constantine Akropolites on St. John the merciful the young*, *Analecta Bollandiana*, 91/1973, pp. 31–54, in part. pp. 31–33). Moreover, this could be a trace of the previous effort to make him a counterpart of a ‘hero’ of the city of Nicaea, St. John the Merciful the Younger (for this saint refer to *ibidem*); as we have seen, this tension between the two centers dates back more likely to the thirteenth century, during the kingdom of Vatatzes, when the capital was moved from Nicaea to Magnesia.

³⁰ The fragments in the Burney codex were published and briefly commented on in D. POLEMIS, *Remains of an acolouthia for the Emperor John Ducas Batatzes*, C. MANGO – O. PRITSAK (eds.), *Okeanos. Essays presented to Ihor Ševčenko on his sixtieth birthday by his colleagues and students*, Cambridge (MA): Ukrainian research institute-Harvard university, 1983 (*Harvard Ukrainian studies*, 7), pp. 542–547. As we will see, the *apolytikion* (except for the last two verses which, out of the prosody, could be a posterior addition) and the *kontakion* are identical to those of the Lesbos manuscript (where they occupy, respectively, ff. 40r and 44rv); the *oikos* seems instead to represent another version of the same *akolouthia* (probably the result of different composition preferences of the compiler). In the Lesbiacus, f. 44v, we read: «τῶν βασιλέων τὸ ἐκλαμπρον κάλλος / δεῦτε πάντες τὸν ὕμνον διπλοῖς τοῖς στεφάνοις / πιστῶς Ἰωάννην καταστέψωμεν / τοῦ γὰρ ἐχθροῦ ἐκνικήσας γενναίως τὰ ἔνεδρα / δῶρον Θεοῦ γὰρ μέγα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἀναδέδεικται, / τῶν θαυμάτων ταῖς λάμψεσιν / παντοίων τοίνυν νοσημάτων / ἰατρὸς ἀναφανεῖς ἐτοιμότητος (ἐτοιμότητος in the manuscript) / καὶ τροπαιοῦχος τοῦ φίλοχρίστου στρατοῦ / καὶ νοσοῦντων παραμύθιον», *gather all to the hymn, with double crowns / let us coronate John, / the brilliant beauty among the emperors; / for, having valiantly having wonderfully frustrated the ambushes of the enemy, / as a great gift from God*

Apolytikon

Ταχύς εἰς παράκλησιν τῶν προστρέχόντων
 εἰς σέ,³¹
 ἀνάκτων ὑπέρτατε καὶ πενομένων τροφεῦ,³²
 Ἰωάννη ἀοίδιμε, εἴλκυσας σὺ πρὸς πίστιν³³
 τῶν βαρβάρων τὰ πλήθη· ἔλαβες παραδόξως
 τοῦ ἰᾶσθαι τὰς νόσους τῶν πίστει
 προστρέχόντων σε.³⁴
 Διὸ καὶ οἱ ἐν πίστει προστρέχουσί σε·³⁵
 ἀφθόνως λαμβάνουσι τὴν ἴασιν³⁶ : +
*Quick to the prayer of those who run
 towards you,
 highest of the lords and nurturer of the poor,
 John of blessed memory, you drew to the
 faith
 the multitude of barbarians. Amazingly, you
 undertook
 to cure the illnesses of those approaching
 you with faith.
 For this reason, then, those who run to you
 obtain healing abundantly.*

Kontakion

Προνοία³⁷ θεοῦ τοῦ πάντων βασιλεύοντος
 ἐλαίῳ³⁸ αὐτοῦ ἐχρίσθης, παναοίδιμε·³⁹
 Ἰωάννη, κράτιστε τῶν ἀνάκτων, ἀναξ
 ὑπέρτατε,⁴⁰
 τῶν ἰαμάτων τὴν χάριν λαβὼν,
 νοσοῦντων ὑπάρχεις παραμύθιον⁴¹ : +
*By the providence of God, who reigns over all,
 You, celebrated by everybody, were
 anointed with his oil;
 John, most powerful of lords, O highest lord,
 having received the grace of healing,
 you are the solace of those who are ill.*

Oikos

Τίς ἰκανὸς διᾶραι τὰ χεῖλη αὐτοῦ⁴²
 καὶ τὴν γλῶτταν ἀξίως κινήσαι⁴³
 πρὸς εὐφημίαν τοῦ εὐσεβοῦς ἀνακτος·
 ἢ δυνήσεται καταγγεῖλαι τῶν ἀρετῶν
 αὐτοῦ⁴⁴
 καὶ τῆς ἐλεημοσύνης τὸ πέλαγος;
 Ἀλλὰ πόθῳ καρδίας τολμῶντες
*Who could open his lips
 and move the tongue worthily
 for the praise of this pious lord
 or describe the sea of his virtues
 and of his mercy?
 Nevertheless, daring by the desire of the
 heart,*

*to men he has been revealed, / through the rays of the miracles / for the widest range of
 diseases / having shown himself as the promptest doctor / and the trophy-bearer of the God-loving
 army / and the solace of the suffering. The sigla used in the following footnotes have to be read as: B =
 Burney 54; L = Leimonos 124.*

³¹ εἰς σέ] εἰσέ B.

³² τροφεῦ] τροφεῦς L.

³³ ἀοίδιμε] ἀοίδιμε B εἴλκυσας] εἴλκησας B πίστιν] πίστην B.

³⁴ ἰᾶσθαι] ἰᾶσθε B νόσους] νόσους B σε] σοι L.

³⁵ σε] σοι B.

³⁶ διὸ καὶ ... ἴασιν] τῶν λαμβανόντων ἀφθόνως τὴν ἴασιν L.

³⁷ προνοία] πρόνοια *Polemis*.

³⁸ ἐλαίῳ] ἐλέφ B.

³⁹ ἐχρίσθης] ἐχρίσθης B.

⁴⁰ κράτιστε] κράτηστε B.

⁴¹ παραμύθιον] παραμίθιον B.

⁴² ἰκανὸς] ἰκανῶς B.

⁴³ καὶ] om. *Polemis*.

⁴⁴ καταγγεῖλαι] καταγγῆλε B.

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>εὐφημοῦμεν σε, Ἰωάννη Δούκα μακάριε, ὅτι τὸν δεσπότην ὀλοφύχως ἀγαπήσας καὶ ἐν τοῖς ὑπηκόοις τὸ φιλάνθρωπον ἔνειμας⁴⁵ καὶ μέγας ἐδείχθης τοῦ Κυρίου μαθητής·⁴⁶ νοσοῦντων ὑπάρχεις παραμύθιον.⁴⁷</p> | <p><i>we laud you, blessed John Doukas, because you loved the Lord with all your soul, and bestowed your clemency upon your subjects and were revealed to be a great disciple of the Lord: you are the solace of the ill.</i></p> |
|--|--|

A further connection to the islands where the Greeks fled is shown in an anonymous post-Byzantine *Life of St. Vatatzes*, composed after June 29, 1659 (explicit *terminus post quem* in the text), discovered and revised – «μετέφρασεν» he reported – by Nicodemus the Hagiorite, and published without any further indication regarding origin and provenance by another metropolitan of Ephesus, the erudite Agathangelos (in charge from 1872 to 1895). The narrative of this text is based on the same dossier as that of George of Pelagonia’s *Βίος*, following the same plot but using those materials for a proper liturgical aim; the final part, a sort of appendix merged later with the *Life*, narrates a miracle story, which takes its cue from the description of an icon of John III kept on the island of Tenedos.

Furthermore, during the entire seventeenth century, a new wave of migration started, but this time in the opposite direction: due mainly to an economic revival in the mainland, Greek populations from Thrace and the Aegean islands came back to Western Anatolia and settled along its fertile valleys.⁴⁸ Magnesia was the perfect landing point for the newcomers, and tax exemption contributed to a rapid population growth; the city soon became a densely populated commercial hub, primarily for the textile and tanning industries, then also for the emerging tobacco and cotton trade. Its growth was prevented only by the swift development of Smyrna as a colonial port, together with the increasing decline of activities in the inner region, caused by the arrival of merchants from abroad. Consequently, the Greeks too moved towards the coastline, where they specialized in the service industry: according to a 1640–1641 Ottoman census, their community in the city was by far the largest among those of non-Muslims.⁴⁹

It was only in this context, perhaps when Patriarch Parthenios IV was in office (first charge in 1657–1662), that Vatatzes, whose figure was well established both in that territory and in the hearts of Greeks who lived there, was officially recognized and entered the liturgical calendar of Constantinople. Unfortunately, the

⁴⁵ τὸ] τὸν ἔνειμας] ἔνημας B.

⁴⁶ ἐδείχθης] ἐδίχθης B.

⁴⁷ παραμύθιον] παραμίθιον B.

⁴⁸ Mainly from Chios, conquered by Ottomans in 1566. There lived 406 Greek families and about 7000 Greek villagers (see *Tapu-Tahrir Defterleri* in Turkish Prime Ministry’s Archives, 363).

⁴⁹ See D. GOFFMAN, *Izmir and the Levantine World, 1550–1650*, Seattle-London: University of Washington Press, 1990 (*Publications on the Near East*, 5), p. 85.

document related to this decision has not been preserved and the only source mentioning the event is a brief reference by M. Gedeon.⁵⁰ Additional evidence supporting the strong relationship between Vatatzes and the Lydian region finally resides in the fact that, a century later, Nicodemus the Hagiorite (1749–1809), who studied at the Evangelical School in Smyrna before moving to Mount Athos, not only discovered the aforementioned *Life* – as we have seen – but also composed a new *akolouthia* and the *Synaxarium* entry for the sanctified emperor.

The reasons that determined the canonization of the Nicene ruler are various and complex. From the point of view of the Magnesians, a minority group in a subordinate position, the canonization could have contributed to creating a symbol with which they could identify and by which they could be distinguished from foreigners and other neighboring Christian communities. Which person could better combine love of country, economic success, military forcefulness – and this against the Ottomans! – and religious devotion better than their local hero John Vatatzes? The pressure of the community on the Patriarchate to recognize an emblem, a symbol of cultural, ethnic and religious identity, might have also been catalyzed by the influence of the many Western representatives of the emerging European nations who, attracted there by both collective exotic imagination and profit, had arrived in Smyrna with their backgrounds and revolutionary ideas, with their new political vocabulary and worldviews.⁵¹

But not only this. Behind the patriarchal decision one can glimpse the logic of a purely political act, a resolute stance at a time of deep tensions between center and periphery within the Orthodox world. Christian elites far from the Bosphorus, who had acquired some economic power in trading and established a new range of values imbued by the Western European model,⁵² were pressing to have more weight in decision-making and greater independence, while the Constantinopolitan patriarchate tried to keep the predominant role attributed to it by Gennadius Scholarius (1400–1473).⁵³ That this tension existed and involved directly some of the actors of Vatatzes' story can be proved also by the fact that Parthenios IV, tied by strong interests to Asia Minor provinces, had to fight strongly to assert his authority and, in his attempt to ascend to the patriarchal throne for the fourth time, faced the opposition of Dionysius IV Muselimes (five times on the patriarchal

⁵⁰ See M. GEDEON, *Patriarhikoi pinakes. Eidêseis istorikai biographikai peri tôn patriarhôn Kônstantinoupoleôs, apo Andreou tou prôtoklêtou mechris Iôakeim 3 tou apo Thessalonikês, 36–1884*, En Kônstantinoupolei: Lorenz and Keil, 1890, p. 464. I do not know whether the Greek scholar had access to some particular document or pointed at Parthenios IV's patriarchate just for the reference of the post-byzantine *Life* to the year 1659.

⁵¹ See GOFFMAN, *Izmir...*, cit., p. 91.

⁵² Refer to R. CLOGG, *The Greek Mercantile Bourgeoisie: 'Progressive' or 'Revolutionary'?*, in IDEM (ed.), *Balkan Society in the Age of Greek Independence*, London: MacMillan, 1981, pp. 85–110.

⁵³ The matter is treated in B. MASTERS, *Christians in a changing world*, in S. N. FAROQHI (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Turkey. 3: The Later Ottoman Empire, 1603–1839*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 272–280.

throne from 1671 to 1694), who in contrast had Constantinople as his main power-base. Therefore the canonization of Vatatzes may also be seen as a possible *trait d'union* between these two entities, a sort of peacemaking effort, in a double perspective: for the Constantinopolitan hierarchy, it offered an opportunity to reinforce its position as the only party to exercise authority and make decisions for the Orthodox world; for the community of Magnesia, instead, it could offer recognition of its identity and distinctive characteristics through the official sanction of its “patron saint.”⁵⁴

As I approach the conclusion of this paper, it is worth recalling some aspects of the modern life of St. John Vatatzes which clearly demonstrate the vitality and impact of this topic for the present and future research.

Indeed, the Nicene emperor has become even more important to Greek identity and cultural memory since the second half of nineteenth century, when Greek historians exalted him as one of the major figures of their past and a vital junction in the survival of their roots, pivoting on the paternal role already present in the Byzantine sources on him.⁵⁵ The tangled reasons of this exaltation have not been explored yet, although it is clear why Vatatzes’ martial successes – among the last recorded for the Byzantine era – and his contribution in safeguarding the Greek world after its fragmentation in 1204, could be reinterpreted in such patriotic manner.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the liveliness and the modernity of John III’s legacy was clearly demonstrated by the attempt of K. Amantos (1874–1960), a member of the

⁵⁴ For a similar case study, dealing with a different context – historical and cultural –, see S. REY, *Des saints nés des rêves. Fabrication de la sainteté et commémoration des néomartyrs à Lesbos (Grèce)*, Lausanne: Éditions Antipodes, 2008. At the same time, Vatatzes’ canonization could have had also the strategic role to unite Orthodoxy, increasing its power and influence in the so-called “*millet wars*”: this was a positive strategy after all, if we consider that «by the mid-eighteenth century [...] the guardians of ‘tradition’ against the innovation of Catholicism and the traditions of local autonomy that had emerged in the absence of a centralized Mother Church» reported the final success (MASTERS, *Christians ...*, cit., p. 280).

⁵⁵ According to George Akropolites, John III acted as a «father» to his people (*Epitaph* 21; ed. HEISENBERG and WIRTH, II p. 28 ll. 22–6), while from Pachymeres’ point of view he could be rightly praised as the «father of the *Romaioi*» (*History* 1.23; ed. FAILLER, I p. 99 l. 5).

⁵⁶ Those were the traditional features Vatatzes was carrying with him since his lifetime. See, to cite just one example, Theodore II’s *Enkomion* 14 (ed. THEODORUS DUCAS LASCARIS, *Encomio dell’imperatore Giovanni Duca*, ed. and trans. by L. TARTAGLIA, Napoli: D’Auria, 1990 [*Speculum*], p. 69 l. 608 – p. 70 l. 614): «ἀλλ’ ὁ γε τοῦ Χριστωνύμου λαοῦ βασιλεὺς, ὑπὸ τῆς Λατινικῆς καὶ Περσικῆς καὶ Βουλγαρικῆς καὶ Σκυθικῆς καὶ ἑτέρας πολυαρχίας ἐθνικῆς καὶ τυραννικῆς τὴν Αὐσονίτιδα γῆν μερισθεῖσαν μυριαχῶς, εἰς ἓν ταύτην συνήγαγε, καὶ τοὺς ἄρπαγας ἐμαστίγωσε καὶ τὸ λάχος τούτου ἐφύλαξε, καὶ δόρατί τε καὶ φασγάνῳ καὶ εὐβουλία καὶ ἀγχινοία τὸν ἀρχαῖον ὄρον ἡμῶν ἀνήγειρε καὶ ἀνῶρθωσε, καὶ τρόπαιον ἀρετῶν ἀνεστήσατο», *the emperor of Christians united Ausonia, which the domination of the Latins, of the Persians, of the Bulgarians, of the Scythians and of other nations, hostile and usurpers, had divided into many parts; he lashed looters, safeguarded the possessions and, by the spear and the sword, by wisdom and sharpness, restored and re-established our ancient border, raising a trophy of virtue for himself.*

Academy of Athens, to have John III depicted in the Athenian Parliament.⁵⁷ In addition to this, there are now several books written for a public audience, as well as websites dedicated to the Nicene emperor and sensationally entitled «Father of the Greeks» or «St. Vatatzes».⁵⁸

The most recent 'return' of the Nicene emperor dates to the beginning of the twenty-first century when, moving from the patriotic figure I just described, some Greek right-wing circles reinterpreted Vatatzes' legacy in order to create a new version of the legend of the 'petrified emperor': after many centuries, then, Vatatzes was brought back to life by nationalists combining hagiographic literature and the story of his aforementioned posthumous appearance in Magnesia, together with some misreadings of various apocalyptic legends as those of Leo the Wise and Ps.-Methodius, «to which the superstition [...] gave credence» ever since.⁵⁹ According to them, the person destined to wake up and scare away the 'infidels', giving back freedom to the Greeks, was indeed John III, and not Constantine XI Dragases Palaiologos (r. 1449–1453), the last Byzantine emperor, who is majestically celebrated in this role by A. Kaldaras' and S. Spanoudakis' songs as well as by K. Palamas' and O. Elytis' literary works.

While John III has been always considered an important historical figure of the late Byzantium and as such has attracted some academic interest, very little has been done to date to investigate how his figure evolved through the centuries and to explain his presence and role in the shaping of modern Greek national identity.

This general overview has attempted to fill this gap, demonstrating that the figure of Vatatzes played in reality various and different roles throughout the centuries: he was a successful ruler during the years of the Empire of Nicaea, a crucial bridge towards the dynasty of the Palaiologoi, an emperor-saint for the Orthodox Church, a symbol of identity for the exiled Greek community under the Ottomans and, finally, a politicized figure in the modern debate. A long road which has amazingly led this ruler from the plots of Byzantium to the network of the Web; a legacy whose endurance, I hope, this paper will put at the center of the future studies and debates on John III Doukas Vatatzes.

⁵⁷ Native of Chios and interested in the Greek-Turkish relations in the Aegean and Asia Minor, Amantos discovered a post-byzantine manuscript of George of Pelagonia's *Life of St. John*, the Sinait. gr. 2015, and also studied the origin and composition of Vatatzes' family (see, respectively, K. AMANTOS, *Ho bios Ióannou Batatzê tou Eleêmonos*, in *Prosphora eis Stilpôna P. Kuriakidên*, Thessalonikê: G. S. Chrêstou, 1952 [*Periodikon Suggramma Hetaireias Makedonikôn Spoudôn*, 4], pp. 29–34 and IDEM, *He oikogeneia Batatzê*, *Epetêris hetaireias Buzantinôn Spoudôn*, 21/1951, pp. 174–176).

⁵⁸ Those are O. DITORA, *Patera Hellênôn*, Agkathia, n.d. and I. A. SARSAKIS, *Ióannês Doukas Batatzês ho ek Didumoteichou hagios autokratôras tou Buzantiou*, Thessalonikê, 2008.

⁵⁹ See A. MILIARAKIS, *Historia tou vasileiou tês Nikaias kai tou despotatou tês Êpeirou (1204–1261)*, Athênais: Typographeion adelphôn Perrê, 1898, pp. 416–417.

