

The Early Relations between the Ottoman State and the Orthodox Church: An Instance of *Istimâlet*

Raymond Detrez

Ghent University, Belgium

e-mail: Raymond.Detrez@Ugent.be

ORCID: 0000-0002-8055-9829

Abstract

Shortly after the capture of Constantinople in 1453, Sultan Mehmed II made Gennadios Scholarios the new ecumenical patriarch, defining at the same time the rights and privileges of the Orthodox Church under Ottoman rule. When in the 1530s, some Muslim leaders demanded that the city's remaining churches be closed, Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent refused on the basis of (a travesty of) a legal inquiry. A close reading of Greek and Ottoman sources sheds light on the accommodating policy, called *istimâlet*, which the Ottoman state pursued toward the Orthodox Church.

Keywords

Ottoman Empire, Ecumenical Patriarchate, Gennadios Scholarios, Jeremias I, *istimâlet*

Winning over the Christians

The siege and fall of Constantinople have been described by four contemporary Greek historians: Doukas (c. 1400 – after 1462), George Sphrantzes (1401 – c. 1478), Michael Critobulus (c. 1410 – c. 1470), and Laonikos Chalkokondyles (c. 1430 – c. 1470).¹ Curiously enough, given the importance of the event, only Critobulus,

¹ Since there is no established way of transcribing Greek names, especially those from the Byzantine period, which are often Latinized, I have resorted to the transcription used by the translators and researchers of these sources, aware of the inconsistencies.

well informed though not an eyewitness, gives an account of the events related to the enthronization of the first post-Byzantine patriarch Gennadios Scholarios by Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror. The others obviously had their own reasons for ignoring the event. George Sphrantzes, who faithfully served the last Byzantine emperor Constantine, hated Mehmed and was probably not inclined to give him credit for his gesture.² Laonikos Chalkokondyles and Doukas, on the other hand, had supported the reunion of the Churches of Rome and Constantinople, which Gennadios Scholarios had successfully opposed, hence their reluctance to pay tribute to him as the new patriarch.

Critobulus was born on Imbros (now Gökçeada in Turkey) and spent almost all his life on the island.³ In Constantinople, where he received a solid education, he was a fellow student of the future patriarch Gennadios. After the fall of Constantinople, he sent a delegation to Mehmed II to ensure that the islands of Imbros, Lemnos, and Thasos, instead of being annexed to the empire, would be given to a Genoese dynasty as an Ottoman fief. After the sultan finally conquered the islands in 1455–1456, Critobulus became the governor of Imbros. When the Venetians took Imbros in 1466, he left the island for Constantinople. There, he completed his *Hē zoē tou Mōameth B'* (Life of Mehmed II), covering the period from 1451 to 1467 and offering a vivid description of the fall of Constantinople and Mehmed's various campaigns in the Balkans. His biography of the Sultan remained unknown until 1860 when the German theologian Constantin von Tischendorf discovered it in the library of the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul and published the accompanying dedicatory letter to Mehmed.⁴ Obviously, the copy that von Tischendorf brought to light is Critobulus's own manuscript. No other copies of it have been preserved, and it is not mentioned, nor has it left any trace, in later sources.

Given the author's good relations with both Sultan Mehmed and Patriarch Gennadios, Critobulus's account of the enthronization should be read with caution. However, since it is the only contemporary source that we have at our disposal, it remains an obvious starting point for a discussion of the event.

Critobulus writes:

When the Sultan had captured the City of Constantine, almost his very first care was to have the City repopulated. He also undertook the further care and repairs of it. He sent an order in the form of an imperial command to every part of his realm, that as many inhabitants as possible be transferred to the City, not only Christians but also his own people and many of the Hebrews.

² For a long time, the *Chronicon maius*, attributed to George Sphrantzes, was cited as the major contemporary source on Gennadios's installation. However, since it has been proven to have been authored by the well-known forger Makarios Melissenos-Melissourgos in Italy c. 1580, the *Chronicon maius* will not be taken into account here.

³ Diether Roderich Reinsch, "Kritobulos of Imbros – Learned Historian, Ottoman *Raya* and Byzantine Patriot," *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta/Recueil des travaux de l'Institut d'études byzantines* 40 (2003), 299–301.

⁴ Aenoth. Frid. Const. Tischendorf, *Notitia editionis codicis Bibliorum Sinaitici*, Lipsiae: F. A. Brockhaus, 1860, 123–4.

Next he ordered that those parts of the wall which had been destroyed by the cannon should all be strongly rebuilt, and that wherever else they had been damaged by the ravages of time, along the land or along the sea, they should be repaired. He also laid the foundations of the royal palace, choosing, as I said, the finest and best location in the City. He further ordered the construction of a strong fortress near the Golden Gate where there had formerly been an imperial castle, and he commanded that all these things should be done with all haste.

He commanded also that the Roman prisoners should work, and should receive a daily wage of six aspers or more. This was in a way a piece of wise foresight on the part of the Sultan, for it fed the prisoners and enabled them to provide for their own ransom by earning enough to pay their masters thus. Also, when they should become free, they might dwell in the City. Not only this, but it also showed great philanthropy and beneficence, and proved the magnanimity of the Sultan.⁵

Critobulus explicitly points out that Christians participated in restoring and repopulating Constantinople as well, which the Ottoman authors do not mention. Only Ursun beg reports that “prisoners from the surrounding lands of the infidels, subjected by the sword” were transferred to the city.⁶ Derviş Ahmed Aşıkpaşazade in his *Menâkib-i Tevârîh-i Âl-i ‘Osmân* (The Deeds or The Chronicle of the House of Osman) refers to the restoration of the city by immigrants but ignores the fact that Mehmed also invited – or forced – Christians to move there. He mentions, however, that Mehmed’s measures were bound to fail because he required the newcomers to pay taxes.⁷ He was forced to repeal the taxes but later introduced them again at the suggestion of one of his viziers, the son of an “infidel,” who, in order to secretly keep the city for the Christians, allegedly wanted to discourage Muslims from settling in Constantinople. After renewed protests, the taxes were repealed again.⁸

The tax controversy apparently made a deep impression on Ottoman historians; it is mentioned, for example, by Mehmed Neşri.⁹ It shows that Mehmed initially intended to repopulate Constantinople with Turks or Muslims; Christians were a second choice. Moreover, the repeated levying of taxes, despite all protests, suggests that Mehmed needed money. The shortage of cash may have induced him to repopulate the city also with Christians and Jews, who, in addition to being useful as artisans and construction

⁵ Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, ed. and trans. Charles T. Riggs, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970, 92, <http://macedonia.kroraina.com/en/kmc/index.htm> [accessed November 11, 2022]; original Greek: *Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae*, ed. Diether Roderich Reinsch, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1983, 90. “Roman” here means Byzantine or Greek.

⁶ Tursun beg, *Tarih-i ebü'l-feth* [History of the Conqueror], quoted by Friedrich Giese, “Die geschichtlichen Grundlagen für die Stellung der christlichen Untertanen im osmanischen Reich,” *Der Islam. Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur des Islamischen Orients* 19 (1) (1931), 271.

⁷ [Ahmed Aşıkpaşazade], *Vom Hirtenzelt zur Hohen Pforte. Frühzeit und Aufstieg des Osmanreiches nach der Chronik „Denkwürdigkeiten und Zeitläufe des Hauses ‘Osman“ vom Derwisch Ahmed, genannt ‘Aşık-Paşa-Sohn*, ed. and trans. Richard F. Kreutel, Graz–Wien–Köln: Verlag Styria, 1959, 200–1.

⁸ Giese, “Die geschichtlichen Grundlagen,” 264–77.

⁹ Mehmed Neşri, *Ogledalo na sveta. Istorija na osmanskija dvor* [The mirror of the world. A history of the Ottoman court], ed. and trans. Marin Kalicin, Sofija: Otečestven front, 1984, 271–2.

workers, paid significantly more taxes than Muslims. Critobulus points out that Mehmed treated the “Roman prisoners” well in order to keep them in the city.

Given the massacres that occurred during the sacking after the capture of the city and the distrust that the Muslims, judging from Aşıkpaşazade’s account, clearly felt toward Christians, Mehmed might have thought that some “confidence-building measures” would be helpful. According to some historians, the restoration of the Patriarchate was such a measure.¹⁰

Critobulus continues:

During that period he [Mehmed] called back Gennadius, a very wise and remarkable man. He had already heard much through common report about the wisdom and prudence and virtue of this man. Therefore, immediately after the capture he sought for him, being anxious to see him and to hear some of his wisdom. And after a painstaking search he found him at Adrianople in a village, kept under guard in the home of one of the notables, but enjoying great honors. For his captor knew of his virtue, even though he himself was a military man.

When the Sultan saw him, and had in a short time had proofs of his wisdom and prudence and virtue and also of his power as a speaker and of his religious character, he was greatly impressed with him, and held him in great honor and respect, and gave him the right to come to him at any time, and honored him with liberty and conversation. He enjoyed his various talks with him and his replies, and he loaded him with noble and costly gifts.

In the end, he made him Patriarch and High Priest of the Christians, and gave him among many other rights and privileges the rule of the church and all its power and authority, no less than that enjoyed previously under the emperors. He also granted him the privilege of delivering before him fearlessly and freely many good disquisitions concerning the Christian faith and doctrine. And he himself went to his residence, taking with him the dignitaries and wise men of his court, and thus paid him great honor. And in many other ways he delighted the man.

Thus the Sultan showed that he knew how to respect the true worth of any man, not only of military men but of every class, kings, and tyrants, and emperors. Furthermore the Sultan gave back the church to the Christians, by the will of God, together with a large portion of its properties.¹¹

Having decided to re-establish the Patriarchate, Mehmed II evidently chose Gennadios Scholarios as the new patriarch. Gennadios “the Schooled,” born Georgios Kourtesios (c. 1400 – c. 1473), was an extraordinary personality.¹² Although educated in the Palamist and Aristotelian tradition, he had acquired a formidable knowledge of Roman (Catholic) theology, more specifically of Aquinas, whom he sincerely admired. In addition to his scholarly pursuits, he worked as a teacher and served as a senator and a member of the Byzantine supreme court. After the 1437–1438 Council of Ferrara-Florence, in which he participated as a pro-Unionist, he gradually moved toward radical Orthodox positions and, in 1445, became the leader of the anti-Unionist party,

¹⁰ Giese, “Die geschichtlichen Grundlagen,” 264–77.

¹¹ Kritovoulos, *History*, 93–4; *Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae*, 90–1.

¹² C. J. G. Turner, “The Career of George-Gennadius Scholarius,” *Byzantion* 39 (1969), 420–55; Marie-Hélène Blanchet, *Georges-Gennadios Scholarios (vers 1400 – vers 1472). Un intellectuel orthodoxe face à la disparition de l’Empire byzantin*, Paris: Institut français d’études byzantines, 2008.

which earned him enormous popularity among the citizens of Constantinople. In 1446–1447, the Unionist Patriarch Gregory III ousted him from his position and forced him to enter a monastery. As a monk, he remained the driving force behind the anti-Unionist protests. On the eve of the official proclamation of the Union in December 1452, he wrote and distributed several manifestos, attempting to prevent it.

There is little doubt that Gennadios was chosen by the sultan for his anti-Roman stance. In 1453, Gregory III, who had left Constantinople in 1450, intimidated by the anti-Unionist protesters, was still considered by the supporters of the Union as the legitimate patriarch. Moreover, in the 1450s, the threat of an alliance between Catholics and Orthodox was not at all hypothetical. Only ten years before the siege of Constantinople, during the 1443 crusade led by the Polish-Hungarian king Władysław III / Ulászló I, the Orthodox Christians in the Balkans, despite all religious enmity, had supported the advancing Catholic armies. By the time of the 1444 Peace of Szeged, Mehmed's father, Murad II, had been forced to cede most of his possessions in the western Balkans. Mehmed saw fit to perpetuate the Roman-Constantinopolitan rivalry and to win over the Orthodox Christians in his realm. To this end, making the anti-Unionist Gennadios the new patriarch was a shrewd move. Gennadios, who had been held captive in the vicinity of Adrianople, was brought to Constantinople, where a synod ordained him successively deacon, priest, bishop, and finally patriarch.¹³

If Gennadios was chosen as patriarch for his anti-Roman stance, the Patriarchate itself was not restored solely in view of the threat from the Catholic world. After the defeat of the Western powers at the battle of Mohács in 1526, the Patriarchate continued to exist undisturbed. Even more revealing is the fact that after 1453, not only the Armenian Church but even the Jewish community, with which the Catholics were unlikely to ally themselves, were given the same rights and privileges as the Orthodox Christians.¹⁴

The most important reason why Mehmed II restored the Patriarchate was the traditional Islamic way of dealing with non-Muslim communities, established by the early Arab khalifs in the Near East (or, politically more correctly, Western Asia) and North Africa.¹⁵ According to this tradition, the “People of the Book” (*ahl al-kitâb*), Christians and Jews, confessors of a revealed monotheistic religion, were not forcibly converted to Islam but were allowed as *zimmis*, beneficiaries of the *zimma* (from the Arabic *dhim-mah*, “covenant”), to freely profess their faith and live “according to their own law.” In exchange, they had to pay a special tax, the *cizye*, and observe a number of restrictions, especially concerning their public visibility. The leaders of the three *millets* or non-Muslim religious communities – Orthodox Christians, Armenian Christians, and Jews – oversaw the relations with the Ottoman authorities and were responsible for

¹³ Turner, “The Career,” 439.

¹⁴ Gunnar Hering, “Das islamische Recht und die Investitur des Gennadios Scholarios (1454),” *Balkan Studies* 2 (1961), 242–3.

¹⁵ Clifford E. Bosworth, “The Concept of Dhimma in Early Islam,” in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire. The Functioning of a Plural Society*, ed. Benjamin Braude, Bernard Lewis, Vol. 1, New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982, 37–51.