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PhD Project Proposal

**The Despotate of Epirus:
The Archaeology of a Late Byzantine State**

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Preface

The subject of this thesis is the examination of the archaeological evidence relating to the period of the Despotate of Epirus. Created in the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade in 1204, the Despotate was an important regional entity situated in the western Balkans. Covering the Adriatic Sea region between Vlora Bay and Preveza with its capital at Arta, it controlled much of the mountainous areas of modern south Albania and the region of Epirus in modern northern Greece.

The standard history of the Despotate was written by the Cambridge – trained Byzantinist, Donald Nicol. Little attention however, has been paid to the archaeology of this Byzantine offspring. Only its distinctive churches to date have attracted attention, while virtually nothing has been published about its urban or rural settlements, its castles and industries, and indeed its relation with its neighbours, as the commercial importance of the Adriatic Sea grew steadily during the 13th century.

The Despotate of Epirus: historical accounts

The founder of the Despotate of Epirus was Michael Angelos Komnenos Doukas, an illegitimate son of John Angelos Komnenos the Sebastokrator, whose father Constantine Angelos had married Theodora Komnene, a daughter of Alexios I. He was also a first cousin of the Emperor Isaac II and Alexios III, the sons of his father's brother Andronikos. Michael's father, John had received the title of Sebastokrator from Isaac II and in the course of his career he is known to have held office under the Empire as governor of the districts of Epirus and Thessaly with the title of Dux.¹

At the time of the arrival of the Fourth Crusade in Constantinople Michael was acting as the governor of the Theme of the Peloponnese. In the later part of the year 1204 he was called for help by his relative Senacherim, the governor of Nikopolis who found his authority threatened by rebellion. When Michael arrived he found Senacherim

¹ Nicol 1957, p. 11.

murdered by the rebels and the province in state of anarchy. He restored order by use of drastic measures putting to death the murderers of the governor and re-asserted his authority as a self-appointed governor. To emphasise his position he adopted the title of Despot, which in the 'cursus honorum' of the Byzantine court ranked next to that of the Emperor. His authority was ratified by the unfortunate Emperor Alexios III who had been abandoned in Thessaly by his son-in-law, Leo Sgouros and had now tried to reach safety in the mountains of Epirus.

During his rule Michael Angelos manoeuvred skilfully, playing his enemies off one against the other to secure his independent position in Epirus. By professing obedience to the Pope he compromised the claims of Venice and by acknowledging the suzerainty of Venice he ransomed himself from the alliance with the Latin Emperor. By 1210 the Despotate of Epirus had ceased being a place of refuge on the defensive against the Latins. Under Michael's leadership it became an independent state whose boundaries were steadily extended at the expense of Franks, Lombards and Venetians.

At the height of his career Michael was murdered in his sleep by one of his servants around the end of the year 1215. His successor was his brother Theodore Angelos, an even more ambitious man and a more accomplished soldier than Michael. Theodore soon began to consider himself as the legitimate successor to the Byzantine throne. He widened the boundaries as well as the influence of the Despotate of Epirus. The extent of territory that he inherited from Michael was soon to be almost doubled thanks to the success of his military leadership against the Bulgarians and the Latins in Macedonia and Thessaly.² With the assurance of Albanian and Serbian support he rapidly took advantage of the weakness of the Bulgarians and in the spring of 1216 he opened an attack perhaps from the region of Elbasan in modern central Albania. Within the year the towns of Ochrid and Prilep had surrendered and the surrounding country at least as far east as Pelagonia was added to the Despotate. The capture of Orchid was to be of more than just purely military significance to the Despotate. Hence, early in the following year Theodore appointed as Archbishop of Orchid Demetrios Chomatenos who was to become a great champion of the western Greeks not only against the Latins but also against the

² Nicol 1957, pp. 48 – 49.

claims of the Emperors at Nicaea.³ To the north and east of Orchid Theodore's authority was acknowledged at least as far as the towns of Dibra, Prilep, Pelagonia and Prosek. To the south Kastoria, Grevena and Berroia were all within the boundaries of his Despotate before the year 1220. By about 1230 Theodore was ruler of the whole of Northern Greece from Naupaktos to Neopatras north to a line running from Durrës to Serres, including a large part of Bulgaria, confining the Kingdom of Thessalonica to the narrowest limits.

When in November 1224 the Pope had to report that the Crusade for the defence of Thessalonica could not set out until the following spring the Latins troops and the garrison at Thessalonica who had been under siege for many months lost hope of assistance and surrendered.



Fig. 1 - Maximum territorial expansion of the Despotate of Epirus under the rule of Theodore Angelos.

³ Nicol 1957, p. 49.

In December 1224 Theodore entered the city. The conquest of Thessalonica, the most important city in Greece, transformed the Despotate into a Kingdom and the Despot into an Emperor (Fig. 1).

A synod of clergy held at Arta confirmed Theodore's claim to the imperial crown, appointing Demetrios Chomatenos, Archbishop of Ohrid, to perform the ceremony of coronation. Defeated by the Bulgarian King, John Asen at the battle of Klokotnitsa in April 1230, Theodore fell at the height of career, and the kingdom which he had only half created struggled on for some years with Manuel, Theodore's brother contriving to maintain his hold on Thessalonica under the constant threat of Bulgaria and Nicaea.

Theodore's heritage, however, was bequeathed to his nephew, Michael II Angelos, the son of the founder of the Despotate, who returned to Arta to set up himself as a ruler of the territory which his father had preserved from the conquest by the Crusaders. After having secured his position in the capital behind the Pindos mountains, Michael began to expand the confines of his Despotate over Thessaly and several Ionian islands including Corfu. He continued the traditional alliance with the Albanians, Venetians and the Kingdom of Sicily and strengthened his relations with the Serbs, posing a constant threat to the Frankish dominions and Nicaea. He was the last serious rival to the Kingdom of Nicaea and continued to think of himself as an emperor. Akropolites, a contemporary historian and devotee of the Kingdom of Nicaea, gives a detailed account of Michael's campaigns and engagements but says nothing on the internal organization of the Despotate. Following the terms of his will Michael divided the Despotate between his two older sons, Nikephoros and John Doukas, placing his two younger sons under their authority. Nikephoros received Arta and Epirus, and John Doukas, Neopatra and Thessaly.

With the restoration of the Byzantine Empire in 1261 by Michael VIII Palaiologus, the rivalry between the Greek states, Epirus and Nicaea, over the throne of Constantinople came to an end and the Despotate of Epirus and Trebizond continued to exist until they and the entire Byzantine Empire became subject to Ottoman rule.

Principal Monuments in the Region of Epirus

A considerable number of medieval fortifications, castles and ecclesiastical monuments in the region of Epirus relate to the period of the Despotate either as newly built structures or as reconstructed or modified ones. The fortress at Rogoi to the west of Arta for instance or Bellas to the north – west of Ioannina were probably built or reinforced during the rule of the Despots. And like them, many other fortresses along the Ionian coast and in the Drinos Valley in modern Southern Albania may well belong to this period.

A larger number of the known monuments of the Despotate survives within the district of Arta, its capital, and these date mainly to the reign of Michael II. Tradition attributes the repair and rebuilding of the imposing walls of the citadel to Michael and many of the churches and monasteries are silent witnesses of the ruler and his wife, Theodora. One of them is the chapel of the Monastery of the Balchernai situated to the north – east of Arta. The monastery dates from the end of the 12th century but the church was considerably renovated and embellished by Michael II. A short distance from this monastery on the present road to Amphilochia stands a small church whose renovation is also related to the early years of Michael II and is known as the Virgin of Bryoni. In the plain to the south - east of Arta stands the church of St. Demetrios Katsouri, which was once the chapel of a Patriarchal monastery. Its original construction as a three-aisle basilican structure dates to the 10th century but a renovation was carried out in the 13th century, when the church was transformed into a cross-in-shape form with a cylindrical dome. Frescoes of saints beneath the 17th century wall paintings are assigned to the early 13th century and may be the work of refugee artists from Constantinople at the time of the reconstruction of the church, thus representing the earliest known paintings in the district of Arta. The monastery of Kato Panagia was founded by Michael II as attested by Job in his 'Life of St. Theodora' and confirmed by the inscriptions in the church.

As a highly predominant feature of all churches in Epirus for this period, the exterior of the building is richly decorated in geometrical patterns, rosettes and other motives worked in red tile and brick. Another feature of the exterior of churches and at times of fortifications seems to be the inscriptions in tile fragments, which mention the name of their founder. Besides the several examples of inscriptions of Michael II found

on the walls of the churches at Arta, such inscriptions appear on the walls at Durrës, mentioning Theodore's care for the defence of the city and at Thessalonica.

Though of no great administrative importance, Butrint represented a significant strategic strong-hold for the Despots thanks to its role of linking Corfu and the mainland. The period of the Despotate, during which the region of Butrint is known as *Bagenetia* or *Vagenetia*,⁴ is one of reinvigoration for the town. Of Butrint's most substantial remains, the wall circuits were largely the result of the Despots' fortification campaigns. During this construction campaign the Late Antique city wall was refurbished and reinforced with several towers, while on the northern part of the peninsula the northern citadel was created by the refortification of the earlier lower city wall on that side and the construction of a new wall between the lower circuit and a new acropolis circuit.⁵ On the acropolis a wall was constructed around the hill top with six gateways providing controlled access into it. Refurbished with imposing gateways, rampart walks and posterns, the new fortifications were impressive in height and strength.

A considerable number of religious buildings represent again a major assemblage of material evidence dated from the 13th century from the town of Butrint. The most substantial remains are those of a small church adjacent to the late antique baptistery. Another small church appears to the north – east of the city, constructed directly against the medieval city wall that linked the lower city wall to the acropolis, whereas a small structure next to the well at the Lion Gate seems to have constituted another small chapel. Remains of a partially destroyed church can be seen above the *stoa* to the east of the theatre at a distinctively higher level compared to the late antique one, while another church is reported to have existed in the so-called *Gymnasium* and was demolished during the Italian excavation of this building in the 1930s. Faint traces of a triple – apsed church can be seen in the flat area to the east of the current castle wall on the acropolis. Finally, the Great Basilica seems to have been subject to further modifications during this period with the addition of two small chapels on either side of the transept and the opening of a new doorway on the north wall of its north aisle, serving by now as the cathedral of the city.

⁴ Hodges 2006, p. 149.

⁵ Martin 2003, p. 98.

The interior of almost all of these churches was embellished with fresco paintings whereas the plan of some of them and the masonry recall the later medieval churches of the region build under the rule of the Despots⁶ such as the nearby churches at Mesopotam, Çiflik, etc.

Ioannina became the second most important town of the Despotate of Epirus after its capital, Arta. The founder of the state of Epirus Michael I Komnenos Doukas, repaired the city walls and established Byzantine families of refugees, such as the Filanthropinoi, Stratigopouloi etc., from Constantinople. During the late Byzantine era, several churches were erected in the Ioannina region. In this period the first monasteries on the island of the Pamvotis lake were founded. According to an inscription, the church of the Philanthropinoi monastery was renovated in 1292 and during the same period the church of the Stratigopouloi Monastery was built. At the end of the 13th century the Taxiarches (Greek for Archangels) church was built, a typical example of the so-called "School of the Seignory", and a little later the Red Church near Konitsa. In Molyvdoskepastos, the Byzantine name of which was Dipalitsa, survives the church of St. Demetrios, dating from this period. Unfortunately much of the grandeur of Michael I's fortifications and monuments of this period were later obscured or destroyed by subsequent Turkish constructions.⁷

Outline of objectives and methodology

The research for this thesis will begin by examining why the Despotate of Epirus, unlike the contemporary Kingdom of Morea in the Peloponnese has received such limited study. Encompassing the historical traditions of two new countries, Greece and Albania, one objective is to illustrate how this history has been shaped for recent nationalist purposes.

Two main bodies of material evidence will be analysed: the material culture from excavations or other sources, prioritising pottery and coins; and urban or rural architectural remains, primarily fortifications, churches and houses. The most

⁶ Bowden, Mitchel 2003, p. 118.

⁷ Nicol 1957, pp. 196 – 197.

representative examples of the architectural remains in the region will be subject to thorough analyses following the principles of the Archaeology of Architecture, with an emphasis on identifying the remains' archaeological sequence. These examples will provide models of properly recorded standing buildings⁸ which will enable and facilitate further study via parallels with architectural remains in other regions.⁹ Each of the two upper mentioned material resources will be scrutinised to comprehend what the economic, cultural, religious and political affinities of the 13th century Despotate of Epirus were and how these aspects compare with the pre- and post-Despotate periods of the region.

The examination of the first body of material evidence - pottery manufactured and coins issued during the 13th century under the rule of the Despots of Epirus, will aim at achieving an understanding of:

1. the Despotate's economy through identifying a) trade and exchange relations, b) monetary wealth and coin issuing policies, c) degree of economic prosperity.
2. the Despotate's economic strategies in pursuing and fulfilling political goals.

Understanding the economic foundations and policies of the Despotate will facilitate an up-to-date approach to the second body of material evidence. This consists of:

1. priorities in construction activity of fortifications, churches or houses (with consideration of factors behind the possible predominant survival of remains of one of these categories over another).
2. the various possible influences of the building schools of the period, and thus the cultural exchange on a regional scale as well as across the Mediterranean world.
3. significant links of each of these three construction activities to the intent of demonstrating the Despots' newly established power.

As a final objective, the assemblage and analysis of the archaeological data will enable the shaping of an economic, cultural and political pattern of the rise and fall of the

⁸ The only building in the entire region of Epirus that has been subject to the study of Archaeology of Architecture is the Great Basilica at Butrint, as part of my Master thesis with the University of Siena during the academic years 2005 – 2006: 'La Grande Basilica di Butrinto Attraverso l'Archeologia dell'Architettura'.

⁹ Bianchi 1996, 1997c.

short-lived Despotate of Epirus. This in turn will aid a greater understanding of a wider network (of regional and chronological character) through comparisons between the Despotate and the neighbour regions (Dalmatia, Southern Italy, etc.).

The project's first phase will consist of assembling as much available data as possible, examining historical resources of the 13th century through to present day (ecclesiastical and cadastral archives; the accounts of medieval historians and travellers; and the observations and studies of the 19th – 20th century). This data will be utilised as a baseline upon which to build the investigation in to the material culture evidence from the region of Epirus. Archaeological information from the few excavated sites of the region (Butrint, Arta, Ioannina) will represent the study's core data, whilst practical field study of both known and presently unidentified sites in southern Albania and northern Greece, of which there are little or no publications, will be carried out so as to include them in the region's archaeological records.

The field survey which will constitute the project's second phase will aim at producing a GIS map of all the archaeological sites of region that span chronologically from the Late Antique period to the Despotate of Epirus. The results of a previous study by William Bowden on the region's Late Antique period¹⁰ will be integrated into the GIS system along with the new survey data. While the major scope of this undertaking is to create a generic digitized archaeological map of the region, the insertion into a GIS platform of all the data that will be obtained will facilitate its processing and interpretation and will enable:

- the estimation of site distribution in the two different periods
- the identification of change in site's nature (size, importance)
- predominance of a particular type of site over another, etc.

As the nature and amount of information that the research will yield cannot be predicted at this stage, the scale of detail of information and search criteria on the GIS platform will be established during the process of research.

The final phase of the study will focus on ultimate assemblage of results and writing up of final thesis.

¹⁰ Bowden 2003.

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