Macedonia:

A Voyage through History

(Vol. 2, From the Fifteenth Century to the Present)

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Establishing Ottoman rule

Historians from the Balkan successor states have traditionally portrayed the era of Ottoman rule in sombre colours; Vacalopoulos wrote of the especial severity of the Turkish "yoke" in Macedonia, "right from the outset".[1] I note one new history of Macedonia, which commences its chapter on the "Coming of the Turks" with the assertion that "Turkish rule degenerated extremely negatively and it was reflected in the economic-political development of the Balkans."[2] Not surprisingly, Turkish historians portray the earlier years of Ottoman rule in more optimistic terms, arguing that the lands the Ottomans were to conquer had already fallen into acute disorder and depopulation. Among the reasons given for this was the heavy export of slaves, a trade dominated by Italian merchants, which caused the Balkan area to be known as the "land of slaves".[3] However, if depopulation was caused by the slave export, these slaves were captives of Ottoman raiders, for whom slaves were the most favoured form of plunder and the prime motivation for Turkish military penetration into Europe.[4] Most slaves seem to have been Cuman boys from the Russian steppe, who were captured by slaver gangs and passed on from the Black Sea coast via the Bosphorus to the Levant by Genoese merchants. Many were sold to the Egyptian sultans to be trained as Mamelukes, but they had not originated in Byzantine territory.[5] Few were the slaves of Byzantine subjects, who were forbidden the enslavement of

Christians, and generally abided by this dispensation. Such slaves as they held were mainly captured Turks, and these were few.[6]

The Ottoman invasions were accompanied by continuous colonization, though measures aimed at establishing stability and a rule of law provided an equality of protection between Muslims and non-Muslims.[7] There is evidence to support this revisionist doctrine, if one ignores the extreme barbarities accompanying the Ottoman invasions, especially under Sultan Mehmed II, who, during a reign of 33 years, commanded some 873,000 persons to be put to death.[8]

In the early phases of Balkan conquest, the Ottomans left the Macedonian towns and provinces under native rule, allowing Christian kings and princes to retain their fiefs in vassalage to the Sultan, paying tribute and supplying auxiliary troops on demand. The Serb leaders in Macedonia, including Marko Kraljević and Constantine Dejanović, could maintain their rule as vassals of the Grand Turk. If they failed in their duties, their lands would be subjected to Ottoman raiding parties.[9] By 1391, policies had changed. Vuk Branković was forced to cede Skopje to the Ottomans, and instead of awarding Skopje to another vassal, they made it an Ottoman seat of administration. Gradually they universalised this principle. In 1392 or 1393 the Bulgarian Tsar, John Šišman, made an alliance with Sigismund of Hungary in order to shed his vassalage to the Ottomans. This vain attempt ended with the siege and fall to the Ottomans of Bulgaria's capital Veliko T'rnovo – and the end of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. When T'rnovo fell, the victors divided Bulgaria into military fiefs or *spahiluks*, administered by feudal cavalry officers.

The battle of Rovina in 1395 closed the era during which the Serb leaders in Macedonia could maintain their rule as vassals of the Grand Turk. Both Marko Kraljević and Constantine Dejanović were killed in the battle, and the Porte did not recognize their heirs as vassals. It turned their fiefs into the province of Kjustendil, and entrusted the *spahiluks* to its officers. Further south, a similar pattern developed. Soon the Christian aristocracy in Macedonia ceased to exist, or clung on to titles that were meaningless without the territories to support their perquisites. A number of people with old aristocratic names reappeared as smallholders, holding *tapu* (land lease for life) from the Ottoman feudal lords.

Underlying this transition were structural changes in the character of Ottoman rule in Europe. The Ottoman invasions were accompanied by systematic and highly organized colonization. Nomadic Turkic deportees,

especially Turkmens and Tatars, were drafted in, mainly under compulsion, from Anatolia. Each organized group (*uç*) would be brought to a frontier territory and settled along the highways in new villages, under the authority of military officers.[10] The method by which Ottoman armies advanced favoured this process. First, Turkish cavalry would devastate rural areas, driving the inhabitants into defensive castle-towns. This would create famine conditions in these towns, facilitating their capture and the expulsion (or enslavement) of their populations.[11] This created a territorial population vacuum, into which the new blocks of Turkish colonists would be inserted.

According to a study on the Turks in Bulgaria, these blocks seldom mixed with the indigenous Bulgarian population. The sources say nothing about the immigration of women, which is the key determinant of the reproductive power of Ottoman settlement, but they must have brought their women with them, because of the lack of mother-tongue assimilation of the settlers through the taking of native wives. As their Balkan colonies adopted the name of the Anatolian villages whence they migrated, it seems likely that the Turks moved in extended family groups.[12] While this statement is made by inference from the experience of Bulgaria, an ethnographic map of Macedonia made by K'nchov shows the presence of solid blocks of Turkish Muslim settlement to the north of the Aliakmon River, along the Vardar valley, in upland territory to the north of Lake Volvi and in the hinterland of Kavalla.[13]

This demographic transition led to abandonment of the tributary system, for Christian vassal rulers might be used to control and tax indigenous Christian populations, but they could not be left to govern areas with high concentrations of Turkish settlers. Colonisation lent permanence to Ottoman rule in the Balkans. By about 1500, ethnic Turks were about 13 percent of the Balkan population. By way of contrast, the earlier Tatar invasions in Russia and East Bulgaria had been unaccompanied by colonisation and therefore left little behind them except devastation – which subsequently facilitated settlement by the Turks.[14] The problems caused by organized colonization incidentally explain why the Ottomans were subsequently content until the 1460s to leave much of the northern Balkans, Serbia and Bosnia, under rule by Christian vassals, laying kings and despots under heavy burdens of tribute, and playing them against each other.[15] They were relatively slow to move settlers into these territories, and they never colonized them with such intensity as they colonized Macedonia, Bulgaria and Thrace. This, as we will later show, may have been because colonization in the southern Balkans, while efficient in

displacing Christian rule, did not make for domestic stability, because the Turkic colonizers themselves became contaminated with the Shiite heresy and formed a dissident, repeatedly mutinous element.

To rule the conquered territories, the Sublime Porte depended on the *timar* system, administered by its own *spahijas*, cavalry officers, who held landed fiefs *(spahiluks*), collected the Imperial tithe from the resident population, and rode to battle at the Sultan's command. The *spahijas* were granted smallholdings of arable land and the labour services needed to cultivate them, just three days a year per family resident on the fief,[16] plus the right to certain minor taxes. This system kept the *spahijas* relatively poor (by feudal standards) and dependent on the Ottoman state. They were not allowed to bequeath their fiefs to their heirs; these reverted on death to the Sultan, who reallocated them to another *spahija*. This was a successful system of government. The peasants were pacified by the low level of demands made on them, and in the 15th century, visitors to European Turkey were astonished by the high level of security and the rule of law that the Ottomans established.

This bore fruit: Anatolia gave rise to big human surpluses that the Balkans could easily absorb. As semi-nomads, the colonists were relatively resistant to the waves of plague that kept honing back the Christian populations. After 1402, Turkish settlements in Europe had expanded sufficiently to generate their own military manpower, and ceased to be dependent on armies from Anatolia.[17]

The most prominent of these settlements was Yenice, today's Giannitsa. It was founded c. 1372 by *Gazi* Evrenos Beg, a former Byzantine officer who had converted to Islam. Evrenos became one of the most powerful *gazis,* "warriors for the faith", on whom the Sultan depended to lead the Ottoman penetration into Europe, which culminated in Evrenos' shattering victory over the Serbs at the Battle of the Maritsa (1371). *Gazi* Evrenos, who died in 1417, extended his conquests to stretch from Thrace to the Adriatic, and he received accordingly large feudal fiefs, which passed down through his family for generations. The Evrenos family brought in with them a number of *gazi* followers, who raided incessantly, and devastated much of the land between Yenice and Salonica. [18]

The Ottomans did not immediately incorporate the Greek cities, Serres, Salonica, and Kavalla into the Empire, but allowed them to function normally, save for garrisoning them and levying *cizye* (or *harač)*, the poll-tax on Christians.[19] As we noted in Chapter 11, within a few years these

cities freed themselves, and had to be re-conquered. The Ottomans took Serres in 1383, but the vassals in whose control they entrusted it rose in rebellion in 1394, so it was quickly re-taken. In 1391, the Ottomans sacked Kavalla, and then turned on Salonica, which they re-occupied. Unlike Skopje, these cities were not yet Ottomanized.

Ottoman civil wars

In 1402, the remnants of the Byzantine Empire were granted a remission from conquest when the army of Sultan Yilderim Bayazid, victor of Kosovo, was shattered near Angora (Ankara) by the Tatar warlord Tamerlaine. Bayazid was captured, caged and left to die. Tamerlaine took much of Anatolia away from the Ottomans, returning it to displaced emirs who became his vassals, but he left Ottoman Europe untouched. Wars of succession broke out in the Empire, in the first of which the contenders were Mehmed and Issa, sons of Bayazid. Mehmed defeated Issa, and another brother, Suleiman, took up the struggle against Mehmed. In 1403, Manuel Palaeologus, now Byzantine Emperor, exploited the Ottoman conflict by signing a treaty with Suleiman, under which he ended the payment by Constantinople of tribute to the Ottomans. Under the treaty, Manuel recovered Salonica, Halkidiki, and the coast as far east as the mouth of the Strymon (Struma) River, as well as fragments of territory on the Sea of Marmara and certain Aegean islands.[20]

This treaty brought the Byzantines nine years of peace, but Manuel's ally Suleiman was confronted by a third contender, Musa Çelebi, who was probably also a son of Bayazid. Musa, it appears, had been captured with Bayazid his father at the battle of Angora, but was released in 1409, probably with the assistance of Mehmed. Suleiman, an indolent and luxury loving sultan, gave Musa an army and sent him into Anatolia to fight Mehmed.[21] In February 1410, Musa won a battle, on the strength of which he seized much of Rumelia, and had himself crowned as Sultan in Edirne. In June, his army clashed with Suleiman's at Kosmidion, but was defeated. He withdrew into the Bulgarian mountains, from which he conducted a guerrilla campaign.[22] He rebuilt his army, but was again defeated in July near Edirne. He withdrew once more into the Stara planina to continue his guerrilla campaign. At the end of the year, he captured Edirne. Suleiman fled but was caught by Musa's forces and decapitated.

The throne should have passed to the legitimate heir, Suleiman's brother Mehmed I in Anatolia, so he entered the conflict, and some of Musa's most powerful supporters changed sides. The Byzantines also assisted Mehmed against him. Musa sent an expedition into Macedonia, and took Veles and Ovče polje from Mehmed's governors. Mehmed was allied with Prince Orhan, son of Suleiman, whose claims were promoted by the Byzantines. Mehmed sailed from Anatolia to Rumelia, and at a place called Incegis clashed with Musa in July 1412. Musa, leading 7,000 Janissaries, defeated his rival and subsequently defeated him again. In the autumn, he also defeated, captured and executed Orhan. Musa then proceeded unsuccessfully to besiege Salonica. Mehmed, enjoying valuable assistance from Byzantium and various Christian princes including Stefan Lazarević, son of Knez Lazar, engaged Musa in a war of manoeuvre in the Bulgarian – Macedonian borderlands, and the two armies clashed near Samokov in May 1413. As soon as the battle began, some of Musa's officers hastily changed sides, his army collapsed and Musa was killed. However, Mehmed, though a strong and courageous leader, enjoyed little peace. For the next ten years, the Ottoman lands, especially the Balkans, were torn apart repeatedly by the military adventures of a string of rebel leaders, who, like Musa, all tried to overthrow Mehmed's government in Edirne.

Musa's attempt at seizing power was more in the nature of a rebellion than the normal jockeying for the throne among the Ottoman princes. He appointed a prominent mystic and intellectual, Sheikh Bedreddin Simavi, to assume command of his force as *kadiasker* of Rumelia, and Bedreddin brought with him a number of his disciples including Börkluce Mustafa. Bedreddin and his disciples were sympathetic to Shiite doctrines, and this was of capital importance, because Musa drew his mass support from dissident groups, predominantly in the Balkans, who were themselves susceptible to Shiite teaching. Predominant among these were the Turkic colonists, who had been torn resentfully from their settlements in eastern Anatolia and central Asia, and implanted in Macedonia and Bulgaria. Tribal support for the Shia was particularly powerful among the nomadic Yuruks. Musa's following included the dervish orders, especially the Shiite Safavids and Bektaşi, and that meant he could also count on loyal support by the Janissaries, who were always susceptible to mystical doctrines. Other sympathisers included various mystical dervish sects, Alawites, and not a few Christians, who were attracted to the Shiite doctrine of religious equality of Muslim and Christian. To the Ottoman Sunni élite, the Shiites were godless heretics who denied the Koran, and murdered true believers. They went on pilgrimage to Ardabil in Persia,

where Safiuddin, founder of the Safavid order, was buried, and not to Mecca. Matkovski is at pains to emphasise that the rebellion drew in malcontents, especially among less privileged groups, "the poor and oppressed masses" that were attracted by Bedreddin's doctrine of utopian communism. However, his identification of Shiism with class differentiation and struggle is dubious, and the evidence for it inconsistent.[23]

Though Musa was defeated and killed, Bedreddin was captured and spared, and was accorded a comfortable captivity in Nicaea. In 1416, a new revolt broke out on Chios Island, led by Bedreddin's erstwhile lieutenant Börkluce, who represented himself as God's prophet, and Bedreddin as the long-awaited supreme leader or Mahdi, who would establish world justice and equality.[24] The coming of the Mahdi – the last of the twelve imams – was (and is) an explicitly Shia doctrine. Börkluce pitched his appeal to the same classes that had supported Musa's revolt, and raised an army of a few thousand rebels. Sultan Mehmed sent three successive forces against the rebellion, all of which were roundly defeated. At this time, (1416) Mehmed was besieging Salonica, but he had to abandon it in order to deal with Bedreddin's rebellion. His vizier, Bayazid Pasha, with a relatively huge army of 60,000 men, defeated the rebels and massacred 4,000 people. Bayazid had no time to waste, because a second rebel army, led by Torlak Kemal, possibly an Islamized Jew but also a disciple of Bedreddin, appeared in Magnesia. Bayazid defeated this rebellion in turn and had Torlak hanged.

While a prisoner in Nicaea, Bedreddin remained highly influential, and attracted the presence of at least 30,000 followers. In 1416, learning of Börkluce's uprising, he escaped and fled to the Black Sea coast and thence to Wallachia, whose ruler Mircea the Old, who had defeated the Ottomans at Rovina, lent him support. Bedreddin's emissaries fanned out across the Balkans, enlisting support from the same constituency as had Musa, and quickly raised a large army. Proclaiming himself Caliph of Rumelia, he established his camp in the marshes round Deliorman in northeast Bulgaria. This was a former stronghold of Musa Çelebi's rebellion, settled mainly by Shiite Turkmen and Alawite colonists. The uprising fanned out into other parts of Rumelia, including Serres. However, the news began to circulate of the defeat of Börkluce and Torlak, dampening the enthusiasm of the insurgents. When attacked by Mehmed's army, Bedreddin's force rapidly fell to pieces. Bedreddin was captured, possibly by one of his own officers, and sent to Serres, where Mehmed arranged a show trial. He then hanged or crucified him in the market place in December 1416.[25]

By this time, yet another Shiite rebellion was under way, again led by a pretender, Mustafa Çelebi, who also claimed to be a son of Bayazid. Turkish historiography calls him the "false Mustafa". He went from Trebizond to Wallachia to enlist the help of Mircea the Old, and in 1415, he unsuccessfully sought assistance from Venice. However, he won over the support of a powerful Safavid nobleman, Izmiroglu Cüneyd Beg, who then became Mustafa's general. Recruiting followed the usual formula – it drew in discontented Ottoman gentry, dervishes, Shiite inclined colonists, and in this instance Azapi pirates. Armed by Mircea and Cüneyd, Mustafa's army crossed the Danube and marched on Salonica, to the north of which he was confronted by Mehmed's army, by which he was heavily defeated. Mustafa took refuge in Salonica with its administrator, Demetrius Laskaris, who refused to hand him over to Mehmed. After negotiations, Mehmed agreed an annual payment of 300,000 akçes to the Byzantines in return for which the Byzantines would intern Mustafa until Mehmed's death.[26]

When Mehmed died in 1421, Murad II (1421-51) succeeded as sultan. He refused to go on paying, so the Byzantines released Mustafa, who promptly set about building another rebel army based on the region of Salonica, with which he enjoyed good relations. He marched to Yenice where he enlisted the support of the Evrenos family, and thence marched to Serres and Edirne, both of which opened their gates to him. Sultan Murad appointed Bayazid Pasha to march against the rebels, but Bayazid sympathised with Mustafa, and in the ensuing battle, fought near Edirne, both he and his 30,000-man army mutinied. Bayazid fell into Mustafa's hands, and Cüneyd, not trusting him, had him murdered.[27] Murad then put together a new army, which in the spring of 1422 crushed the rebels near Brusa (Bursa). He found a new commander, Mihaljoglu, who defeated the rebellion again, and Mustafa, by now a very sick man, fled to Gallipoli, Murad's army in pursuit. The rebels fled from there to Edirne and thence to Yenice, but at this point, Mustafa's *spahijas*, realizing that they were heading for defeat, handed Mustafa over to the enemy. He was hanged prominently from a tower in Edirne's fortress.[28]

Bedreddin's followers were absorbed into an emergent Shiite dissident movement, the *Kizilbaşi*, (so named for their red caps) which never presented a serious danger to the régime in the Balkans, but established a long-running series of rebellions in Anatolia and central Asia, where central authority was less secure and less determined. The Ottoman régime never succeeded in extirpating the Shiite heresy from the Balkans, and was repeatedly to face more dissidence, influenced by the Bektaşi. Bedreddin's

adherents buried his body where he had been executed in Serres, and later erected a mausoleum over it. It became a focus for pilgrimage. Even in 1968, there were still a few Turks in Bulgaria called Simavites, followers of Bedreddin Simavi.[29] However, in the short term, the remains of Mustafa's uprising were rooted out, and the succession of Shiite rebellions in the Balkans ended. The Christians, it may be noted, involved themselves in all these rebellions, but were never the initiators of any of them, for they were driven by Shiite hostility to a Sunni régime.

Siege and fall of Salonica

Murad, with his hands free, wasted no time in reorientating the revived Ottoman Empire to the offensive.[*] In 1422, Constantinople and Salonica were again put under siege and their environs were laid waste. Salonica suffered such hardship that in 1423 its ruler, Andronicus Palaeologus, decided, subject to an agreement on self-government, to hand his city over to the Venetians. The formal takeover took place on 14 September 1423, with the hoisting of St. Mark's flag in the central square. Aghia Sophia Cathedral seems to have reverted to Roman Catholicism. The Byzantines once more accepted Ottoman vassalage in 1424, so the Ottomans ordered the Venetians out of Salonica. They again besieged the city and cut it off from its hinterland. It began to waste away; a city of about 40,000 in 1423 shrank to 7,000-10,000 during the siege. A major battle at the walls of Salonica in 1426 cost the Ottomans heavily, but supporting the city became excessively burdensome to Venice. Food was scarce and had to be convoyed in, and the local defenders had to be stiffened by bringing in mercenaries. Therefore, in spring 1430, Salonica asked the Ottomans for a compromise. This was rejected, and Sultan Murad marched anew on the city. The Ottomans carried the walls by assault. The Venetian troops fought their way out to their galleys.[30]

This ended Christian political control over southern Macedonia. The White Tower, Salonica's signature monument, was probably built the year the city fell to the Ottomans – either by the Venetians before it fell, or by the Ottomans after its capture.[31] After the city fell, the Ottoman soldiers were allowed to plunder for three days without restraint. Allegedly, they carried off seven thousand people as slaves. Besides this, the sacking

[*] The Byzantines may have angered Murad by supporting the claims of the pretenders, but this was probably not fundamental to the change in Ottoman policy. Fine, *Late Medieval Balkans,* p. 536.

reportedly damaged the magnificent Thessalonian churches, in particular St. Demetrius. They were ransacked and stripped of marble. However, the damage may have been exaggerated, as the churches were described by a reliable observer as "very ornate" one year after the sack.[32] Many churches, monasteries and houses were taken over by the Ottomans and shared out among the Sultan's entourage. Huge spoils, including great landed estates, were awarded to the *gazi* warriors and their descendants, especially to the Evrenos family, who seem already to have acquired extensive *čifliks*.[33] (Gazi Evrenos Beg, victor of the Maritsa, died in 1417).[34]

A story that captures the sinister atmosphere that pervaded the despoiled and deserted city of Salonica was related in 1705 to a visiting French diplomat, Paul Lucas. Most monks at Aghia Sofia were saved, except for one man who refused to leave the church, which he regarded as his home. He warned the Turks he would kill them if they tried to remove him. He fought fanatically and when cornered vanished into the campanile. His assailants followed him up the stairs and cut his head off, flinging it through a window. The head bounced down the tower, leaving it stained with blood. No amount of scrubbing, rubbing and whitewashing could remove the bloody stain: the Greeks looked on this as a miracle, and Lucas, admitting his scepticism of Greek superstition, claimed that he with his own eyes had also seen the red stain on the wall.[35]

As the city was so heavily depopulated, the Sultan arranged for the redemption and repatriation of about one thousand captives, mainly from the leading families. Two years later, the Ottomans tried to repopulate the city with Turks. Among these were 1,000 families deported from the prosperous new Turkish colony of Yenice . Ottoman incomers colonised the upper part of the city and the Acropolis. The Sultan had a palace built in the city.[36] Even so, Salonica's population in 1478 had only recovered to about 10,000, roughly half Christian, half Muslim. The Ottomanisation of Salonica, now called Selanik, proceeded apace.[37] Minarets sprouted alongside sequestered churches and newly built mosques.[38] The grandiose but ramshackle church of Prophet Elijah, built in the cash-strapped Palaeologian period, was converted into a mosque under Ottoman rule, called the Sarayli Camii or "Palace Mosque".[39]

Hunyadi's crusades

After the fall of Salonica, the Ottomans made efforts at expansion beyond the Balkans, so the European campaigns to resist them shifted to the periphery. In 1428, Serbia (under George Branković) accepted vassalage. As a reflection of Constantinople's increasing desperation for a western alliance against the Turks, the Orthodox Church assented in 1439 to Union with Rome at the council of Florence. Consequently, His Holiness felt he ought to assist the Byzantines. To this end, he launched that by then shop-soiled device – a crusade. It started well, when 25,000 Crusaders, led by King Vladislav III of Poland, John Hunyadi of Hungary, and George Branković, crossed the Danube, seized Smederevo and marched into the interior, taking Niš and Sofia. They approached the Ottomans' capital at Adrianople. Checked by the enemy at Zlatitsa, they fell back on Sofia, whereupon Murad decided on peace negotiations. The outcome was that Branković had Serbia restored to him (under vassalage) while in 1444, a ten-year truce between the Ottomans and the Crusaders left the latter in possession of their conquests, presumably in north-eastern Macedonia and Bulgaria. All might have been well if the Pope had accepted this remarkable treaty, but instead, he sent Cardinal Cesarini to re-mobilize the force, (much of which had gone home). The diminished body of troops marched on Varna where it was overwhelmed by the Ottomans. King Vladislav and Cardinal Cesarini were killed.[40]

This outcome did not satisfy John Hunyadi, and in 1448, he led a crusading army into Kosovo. Despot Branković would not help him, so he plundered Serbia as he marched through its territory, infuriating Branković and causing him to betray Hunyadi's plans to the Ottomans. They destroyed the crusading army at the second Battle of Kosovo, thanks also to betrayal by Hunyadi's Wallachian ally.[41] The Ottomans secured uncontested possession of most of southeast Europe from that time, and held the Balkans for 436 years from that date to 1912. The Christian population learned to adapt. In 1448, Veria was captured by the Ottomans with significant help from a local official, John Haritopoulos. For this assistance, his family received remission of taxation in perpetuity.[42] The fall and sack of Constantinople in 1453 amount to little more than a sad historical footnote.

Stability under Ottoman rule

Until the beginning of the 19th century the only serious challenge to the Ottomans in the Balkans came from external powers, in particular Venice and Austria, and not from the interior. For the first 240 years, Ottoman possession of the Balkans was secure. It faced naval warfare from Venice (in which the Ottomans established superiority) but from the 1520s to the mid-16th century, Ottoman power and empire expanded far beyond the bounds of Macedonia. It was on the territories of Albania, Dalmatia, Bosnia, Serbia and Hungary and the city of Constantinople that the military drama of Balkan history was played out. Macedonia, held firmly by its Ottoman *spahijas*, gave its rulers no further trouble - even during the civil war following the battle of Ankara it had remained completely passive - so it had little role to play in the political history of this period. The *timar* system was hugely stabilizing. For 200 years or more, a dependant but efficient military caste held firm possession of the Ottoman lands. The disappearance of the Christian nobility removed any focus around which rebellions could coalesce, and the relatively mild burdens imposed upon the peasants, the consequence of the shallow exploitation that the *spahijas* were permitted, led to a remarkable measure of popular acquiescence.

Despite the absence of serious convulsions, in the post-conquest period rural populations tended to disperse into mountainous areas of refuge, particularly in the Pindus and Olympus ranges. They founded or repopulated high-altitude settlements, such as Siatista, Kozani, Kleisura (above Kastoria), and Katafygi (meaning Refuge) on Mt. Peiria; they drew their support not from agriculture, but from transhumant sheep raising and woollen manufactures. The peninsula of Halkidiki also became a place of refuge because of the inaccessibility of its interior. The still greater inaccessibility of its three peninsulas, Cassandria, Sithonia and Athos, offered particularly safe asylum. In the 15th century, the district of Veria became an important centre for monastic life, because monks, like everybody else, found it wise to retreat into the uplands.[43] Subsequently, in the 16th and early 17th centuries, there was renewed growth of population, but it remained orientated to the uplands.[44]

Ottoman creative culture

Ottoman rule in the 14th and 15th Centuries was not sterile culturally as it was later to become. Infrastructural investment in Skopje attracted

Ottoman finance, probably because of heavy Muslim settlement in the city. As early as 1455, Skopje (Üsküb) numbered 511 Muslim households to 339 Orthodox Christian.[45] Ottoman grandees built a range of fine buildings there, including mosques, an Islamic school, a great two-storey quadrangular caravanserai (the Kuršumli han), Turkish baths, fountains, and soup kitchens. Construction was normally financed by state officials, in particular the descendants of Yiğit Beg, conqueror of Skopje, by the Imperial family, and by charitable foundations (*vak'fs*).[46] * Among the buildings in Skopje was the Sultan Murad mosque built in 1436 as a memorial to the Sultan. Skopje's Daut Pasha bath-house with its two great cupolas, and the double bath house are also of the 15th century.[47] The Mustafa Pasha mosque was built by Mustafa Pasha, ruler of Skopje in 1492,[48] the Bumali mosque in 1495, and the Yahya Pasha mosque in 1504. Ishak-Beg, administrator of Skopje, built the mosque named for him in 1438, and the Ishak-Begovo *medresa* (Islamic school) followed in 1445.[49]

Macedonia's best-known bridge, the Stone Bridge across the Vardar at Skopje, originally 214 metres long with 13 spans, was built as a charitable foundation of the Isa Beg Alaca Mosque, and in 1463, a fortified tower was added. In 1469, the bridge was written into the mosque records.[50] Also in the 15th century, Mustafa Pasha built at his own expense a public aqueduct in Skopje to take water from Banjane village to the mosque that he had built, and to other points in Skopje, including drinking fountains, of which the last survived till the early 20th century. He did not forget to provide finance for the upkeep of the system in perpetuity.[51] Most Ottoman buildings of that time, including the bridges, were solidly built, and eight mosques, mostly ancient, survived the devastating 9^{o} earthquake of 1963.[52]

Salonica too received Ottoman constructional investment, despite its emptiness of inhabitants and the ready availability of great churches available for conversion into mosques. Sultan Murad II commissioned a large Turkish bath and fountains in the upper city, built in 1444. The bath survives, as does the Hamza Beg mosque, built in c.1467. Sultan Bayazid II contributed the stone-built late 15th century *bezistan.* A *bezistan* was a covered market building, originally subdivided internally between merchants who traded in imported textiles. His vizier, Koca Kasim Pasha, contributed another bath-house. Ishak Pasha, governor of Salonica, also

* Even the caravanserais were built for humanitarian purposes. Unlike the inns they resembled they made no charge for a night's shelter. Rihlik & Kouba, *Istorija na Makedonija*, p. 464.

endowed several mosques, fountains and a bath house. One of these mosques, the Alaca, built in 1484 as an *imaret* or workhouse, still stands. Three other bath houses survive from the 16th century.[53] Other notable buildings of this era include the sturdily constructed and ingeniously lighted *bezistan* at Štip. Other *bezistans* were built at Skopje and Bitola. The parti-coloured Tetovo Alaca mosque dates to 1495, but its patterned and painted surfaces both inside and out, date to c.1800. With its "tiny little views of palaces on the Bosporus, ships in the sound, walled gardens and fountains," it is reckoned by M. Kouba an outstanding monument of Islamic culture. The Yeni Cami mosque at Bitola, no less fine, dates to 1561/2. [54]

As the foregoing demonstrates, it was in the 15th and early 16th centuries that the Ottomans built their most beautiful buildings in the Balkans.[55] Most of the new constructions were *vak'fs*. These were philanthropic foundations, and at that time, they were not set up as schemes for tax avoidance, as they later became. They provided services free or below cost. For example, the largest and most magnificent of Sofia's five public bathhouses, built by a benevolent *gazi* who was killed at Kosovo, was open to the public without charge. [56] Constructional investment in Macedonia was heavily concentrated on the cities, but it was not confined to these. In 1470, a 100 metre, five-span granite bridge over the River Struma, the Kadin Most (bride's bridge) was built, according to an inscription on it, by the "high born vizier, master of great emirs and founder of sacred and good works … Ishak Pasha".[57] [Pl. 14.1] He presumably was Ishak Beg, son of Yiğit Beg, who commissioned much of the Skopje complex.[58] We noted above his gifts to the city of Salonica. A similar 16th century stone bridge spanned the Maritsa River near Svilengrad.[59] A fountain at Tetovo dates to c. 1463. Gazi Evrenos and his descendants, whose wealth was derived from the territorial grants awarded by the Sultan, converted their estates into *vak'fs*, to support the five large and 12 small mosques that they built at Giannitsa, two *medresas*, a poor-house, a bath house, and two fine mausolea, for the Gazi and for his grandson, Ahmed.[*] The mausoleum in Giannitsa of Gazi Evrenos, built shortly after his death in 1417 still stands today, a monument much altered and extended to accommodate the tombs of some of his descendants. [Pl.

[*] The Evrenos family was still adding to its endowments, with a clock tower, as late as 1753. It lived at its palace in Yenice (Giannitsa) right until the fall of Ottoman rule in Macedonia in 1912, when the Greek army set the town on fire, despite which some buildings survive to the present. Demetriades, "Tomb of Evrenos," pp. 329-30.

14. 2] According to a doubtful source, Sheikh Lianes, tutor of Ahmed Evrenos, and an energetic propagator of Islamic faith, founded the city of Naoussa in about 1433. He did so out of compassion for the people who lived in poverty on Mount Vermion, and he induced them to settle there.[60] The foregoing evidence shows that much of the early constructional activity under the Ottomans was supported by private revenues generated by territorial grants made at the time of the conquest. When territorial expansion slowed down after the mid-16th century, and stopped in the 17th, new philanthropic endowments dried up. The *vak'fs* created by earlier endowments remained in place, because of the tax benefits attached to them. There were exceptions: Evrenos descendant Serif Ahmed built a massive clock tower in Yenice in 1753, which still stands, and donated it to the town. In Ohrid there was a clock tower of very similar appearance, sketched by Edward Lear in the mid-19th century.

The Church under the Ottomans

The Ottoman régime left the Orthodox Church in a situation theoretically unchanged since the Byzantine era, though in practice, profound changes occurred. At the time of the Conquest, the Patriarchal throne in Constantinople stood vacant. Instead of abolishing the office, in 1454 the government in Constantinople, the Sublime Porte, appointed as Patriarch an outspoken opponent of the Roman Church, George (later, Gennadius) Scholarius, and confirmed the privileges of the Patriarchate. [Pl. 14.3] These were substantial because the Ottomans ruled their non-Muslim communities through the *millet* system. In Ottoman Europe, all Orthodox Christians, Greek and Slavonic, were governed by the Orthodox *millet*, which had responsibilities for taxation, justice and security over the Christian community. The Orthodox *millet* kept the minor Orthodox nationalities firmly subject to Greek control. This *millet* was administered by the Patriarchate, which in 1601 was to establish its headquarters in Phanar, a district of Constantinople. The Byzantine Emperors had subordinated Patriarchal power to their own ambitions; the Sultan inherited their powers over the Patriarchate, but he had little interest in intervening with Patriarchal administration.[61] The influence of the Orthodox Church was nevertheless weak because the Patriarchate disposed relatively little power over the bishoprics and monasteries; the bishops and abbots in turn lacked the means to exercise more than collegial authority at lower levels. As the Balkan peoples became isolated from their Church hierarchies, the weakness of central authority led to devolved decision making. This in turn meant tolerating pluralism in belief and practice,

leaving village priests to run their churches without external interference or guidance. Consequently, the destruction of élite cultural influences led to cultural heterogeneity, and a tendency for localization of taste and design. Localization also meant peasantisation, and an end to the incipient Balkan renaissance of the 14th century. We have noted how the foundation of churches, formerly the prerogative of Emperors and aristocrats, was taken up by folk of lesser wealth and status. Increasingly it was their tastes, or those of semiliterate lower clergy, not scholarly bishops, that dictated what should appear on the walls of the churches. This made fresco design idiosyncratic, but also naïve: small town benefactors were hardly in a position to commission great artists.

Let me show how it worked with reference to a church in Bulgarian Macedonia. St. Demetrius monastery is 3 km. from Bobošević, and according to tradition, John of Rila (876-946), founder of Rila monastery, was ordained there as a monk.[62] The Catholicon (monastic church) dates from the 12th century, but its frescoes were painted in 1488. A donor's inscription in the nave tells us that local people, three icon painters, the monk Neophit and his sons, painted the murals themselves.[63] No aristocrat or church dignitary appears on the list. There was no centralised authority to constrain the artists' spontaneity.[64] The fresco illustrated here represents the martyrdom of St. Stephen - a popular theme in Byzantine church art, but the style is distinctive and unusual; it is more like earlier Latin design than 14th century Byzantine.

Oddities appeared on the walls, which would never have been tolerated in an earlier, more disciplined era. For example, the next picture is part of a "Last Judgment" motif at the same church. Traditionally, a "river of fire" was depicted below the panel displaying the judgment, but this was substituted by a fantastic vision of the sea. A young woman rides a scaly dog-faced, fishtailed monster that is busily devouring a human victim. This woman is no biblical figure, rather she is the Greek pagan sea-goddess Amphitrite.[65*] On the vault, separating the various images of the life of Christ, there is a band of medallions representing the prophets; among them is the Roman Sybil. [Pl. 14.4]

At worst, the peasantisation of 15th century religious art could result in poor, crude technique. The Church of the Dormition of the Virgin (Uspenie Bogorodično) at Veleštovo village outside Ohrid carries an

[*] Amphitrite is similarly represented in the church at Boboshtitsa, Albania, whose frescoes are supposedly much earlier in date.

inscription in Church Slavonic on a painting of two military saints, Mercurio and Demetrius. It identifies six *ktitors*, (founders) the priest Djordje, Stanec and his brother Micho, Rajko Dobrilov, Dabec and Petko. The date of decoration, 4 May 1444, was the same year that the church was built. Another inscription over the church entrance tells us that V'lkoš, his wife, daughter and sons were *ktitors* in 1451, during the reign of Nikola as Archbishop of Ohrid; their money bought a second cycle of wall paintings. It is obvious that the first group of donors hired a competent artist, but the second group was not so fortunate. The panel portraying the martyred doctors, SS. Kosma and Damian, who treated their patients without charge, was executed by a low-grade hand, which would never have been loosed unsupervised on a church fresco under the Palaeologian régime.[66] In neither case was there any hint of an aristocratic donor.

These churches were probably not new, because the Ottomans did not allow building of new churches, so the donors refurbished earlier foundations that had fallen to ruin. A rash of new village churches caused an Ottoman administrator to order in 1613: "unbelievers who live in [Ohrid] *sancak* have built some churches in villages and have thereby committed offences. In connection with this I have ordered that all recently built churches should be liquidated." There is other evidence that the Ottomans were demolishing newly built churches.[67]

Janissaries

The *millet* system of government reflected the relative toleration shown by the Ottoman régime towards non-Muslims. However, relations between the rulers and their Christian subjects were unequal. In about 1329, the Sublime Porte introduced the practice of *devşirme*, the recruiting of boys from subject villages for the Corps of Janissaries, the élite Imperial bodyguard.[68] By the 16th century, the practice was to levy one boy every seven years from every 40 households.[69] *Devşirme* was hated by the Christian population. Indignant critics of the Turk were to describe the wrenching away of hapless boys from their parents, to be forcibly converted to an alien creed, and to serve as the Sultan's soldiers, never again to be seen by their families. The reality was more complex.

In the second half of the 15th century, there were 10,000 Janissaries, and in the mid-16th, 12,000. Originally, Janissaries were forbidden to marry, and were dedicated wholly to military life as infantrymen[70], but this might

be for quite a short period. Janissaries often kept contact with their native villages and protected them. Actions and relationships at this humble level were rarely written down, but they pass into the collective memory as myths. Take for example the tale of three village churches outside Ohrid, at Leskoec, Kosel and Veleštovo, on Galičica Mountain. A youth called Peter was taken in the mid-15th century from Leskoec to serve as a Janissary. At the age of 14 he returned to his village, and built this small church for his mother, who was called Spasja (hence the name of the church, Holy Saviour - Sveti spas). His mother had two sisters, who lived in Veleštovo and Kosel, and Peter provided the cash to build two further churches for them.

All three churches (miraculously) still exist today, but the founder inscriptions they carry do not alas refer to Janissary Peter. We have already discussed the inscriptions and frescoes at Veleštovo. The church at Leskoec was built and decorated in 1462, and as was usual during the early Ottoman period the cost was borne locally. In this case, an inscription on the south wall gives the names of over 20 contributors. Of these people, the plebean Tode and his wife Bulka are beautifully portrayed on the south wall. [Pl.14. 5] I know of no other founder portrait in Macedonia of such clarity and conviction. There is also a portrait of St. Clement of Ohrid; he is treated as the real founder, for he bears a model of his city.[71] The little church of St. Nicholas at Kosel that Peter supposedly built for his other aunt was allowed almost to fall down. It is only now being restored. The frescoes inside have deteriorated beyond recovery.

The image of a devoted and ferocious 15th century Janissary corps may never have had substance. In 1444 (variously 1446), a Janissary revolt temporarily ousted Mehmed II from his first experience of government and restored his father Murad.[72] This revolt broke out in Adrianople. A Persian preacher of heretical Hurufia doctrines enlisted much support from the Janissaries. Hurufism originated with a Persian preacher, Fadlullah (1340-94) who believed he was the Mahdi and preached God's wish to unify the three great religions. After his death by execution, hurufist doctrines attracted the Bektaşi, and belief in Fadlullah's divinity was so strong that the Hurufist dervishes included the line "There is no other God but Fadlullah" in their prayers. The Persian hurufist preacher at Adrianople also became influential at court, especially with Mehmed, (later Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror). Mehmed was dissuaded by the *mufti* (law-scholar) Fihreddin from his sympathies with the Persian, enabling the *ulema* to have him burned to death in public. This was followed by a massacre of several thousand of the Persian's disciples, and

the tearing of tongues out of many others so that they could no longer preach. In response to the persecution, the Janissaries rose against the Ulema and the prince, who they blamed for capitulating to the demands of Fihreddin. In the ensuing disturbances, they set 7,000 houses in Adrianople alight. They were angry because the Persian had preached the Hurufist doctrine that Islam had been superseded by Fadlullah's new religion which cherry-picked the best ideas of Christianity, Islam, and the cabbalistic variant of Judaism. All were therefore brothers, and the Janissaries, who had started as Christians before being converted, found Hurufism a highly congenial faith. Despite further persecution, Hurufism could not be eradicated. This is evidence not only that the Janissaries were a potentially dissident force as early as the 1440s, but that their dissidence had religious roots in heterodoxy: moreover, the Hurufists had close links to the Shia-inclined Bektaşi dervishes.[73]

This was not an isolated example of Janissary dissidence. During John Hunyadi's successful defence of Belgrade in 1456, a decisive sortie from the city broke the battle line of the Janissaries. Despite the strong defences surrounding Sultan Mehmed II's camp, the Janissaries virtually gave up the fight, and showed signs of panic. They would not even defend their Sultan, who was consequently wounded in the leg and was forced to lift the siege.[74] In 1481, the death of Sultan Mehmed II caused another fierce revolt by the corps of Janissaries, who had grown weary of campaigning, and resented the debasement of the coinage in which they were paid.[75]

Sultana Mara Branković and her family

Among the few outstanding Christian personalities of 15th century Macedonia was a woman, Sultana Mara (or Maria). [Pl. 14. 6] Her father was the Serb Despot George Branković (d.1456) ruler of Smederevo. He was the son of Vuk Branković who fought with (but possibly betrayed) the Serbs at Kosovo in 1389, and who lost Skopje to the Turks. George was a talented and highly educated ruler. Mara's mother was a sister of the John IV Comnenus, Emperor of Trebizond.[76] We know little about the mother, and it seems likely that she may have died in childbirth, probably the birth of Mara. In December 1414,[77] Mara's father re-married Irene, a princess of the Cantacuzenus family.[78] This haughty Byzantine aristocrat acquired the soubriquet curséd Irene, though Theodore Spandounis, who was related to her through the Cantacuzenus family, stoutly defended her as "a princess endowed with every virtue."[79] She gave the Despot a second daughter, Katarina and three sons, Gregory (Grgur) (c.1425-1459), Stephen (c.1426-

1476), and Lazar (d. 1458). This dating means Mara was born in 1414 at the latest.

I would confidently put Mara's birth around that year, since her portrait and that of her half-sister show both in their teens, and they appear to be about the same age. These damaged portraits of Mara and her siblings are the sole images of them surviving. We know the circumstances of their origin. The Athonite monastery of Esphigmenou approached her father, Despot George Branković, for financial assistance in 1429, soon after Branković had become Despot.[80] He acceded to its request and issued a charter to the monastery, undertaking to award the monks 50 medieval Serbian *litre* (about 15.6 kg) of silver from the Novo brdo mines each year of his life. This annuity was equivalent to about 400 Venetian ducats. On the magnificently illustrated charter was emblazoned a portrait not only of the Despot, but also of his wife Irene and the five children. Such portraits of donors and their families accompanying Byzantine-type charters acted as extensions of the donor's signature. They were designed to render his or her identity irrefutable. Like the founder portraits on church walls, these charter portraits were therefore probably executed from life, or at least with knowledge of the sitter's appearance. The Despot and his Lady were portrayed with haloes, because their modest pious investment was combined with a dubious claim to royal status. That sufficed to make saints of both of them in the eyes of the grasping Orthodox Church, though I know of no saintly action by either up to that date. The Despot's children, Mara, Katarina, Gregory, Lazar and Stephen, did not merit haloes. Though they were only half-sisters, the portraits of Mara and Katarina display a strong family likeness, which they shared with Gregory and Stephen, who were younger. (Katarina, like her elder half-sister, was fully grown in the family portrait and a full head taller than her brothers Stephen and Lazar).[81]

George Branković's power was greatly increased in 1427 when Stephen Lazarević, Despot of Serbia died, bequeathing him the kingdom. This was because he had no male heir of his own, and his two younger brothers, Vuk and Lazar, had been beheaded by Musa Çelebi, the Ottoman pretender in 1405.[82] However, the Ottomans invaded Serbia in 1428, took several fortresses and forced Branković to accept vassal status, though he hung on to Novo brdo in Kosovo, the richest silver mine in the Balkans, that yielded him an annual 120,000 gold ducats. The Byzantines recognized him and created him Despot in 1429, but he had to cede Belgrade to Sigismund of Hungary. To replace Belgrade, in 1430

Branković began building a great fortress at Smederevo on the Danube, which became his capital.

The creation of Ottoman vassalage was on occasion accompanied by the vassal giving a daughter to the Imperial seraglio: this had been done earlier by Knez Lazar's widow Milica, who gave Sultan Bayazid I her daughter Olivera. George Branković came under Ottoman pressure to part with his daughter Mara as a bride for Sultan Murad II, so that the marriage would guarantee his loyalty to the Ottoman cause. He assented to the engagement c.1433, at the cost of a dowry comprising territory and cash from the revenues of Novo brdo. There was then a long delay, but in 1435, an Ottoman delegation arrived in Serbia to escort Mara to Adrianople for the marriage.[83] She was accompanied by her brothers Gregory and Stephen, but after the wedding, (if there was one), Stephen was obliged to stay behind as a hostage.[84]

Mara was a strong-minded woman and she remained staunchly Christian. As a wife of the Sultan, she lived in Bursa, in a seraglio with more than 300 other women, guarded and serviced by 100 eunuchs, and forbidden contact with any other man.[85] Her life there cannot have been happy. One source claims that the Sultan never actually married her, so little did he care for her, but there is some evidence that this is untrue. In any case, she wielded considerable influence while at court. Despite the opacity of life in the seraglio, we catch the occasional glimpse of her. In 1438, Despot Branković, fearing another attack by the Ottomans, ceded territory to them in the hopes of buying them off. However, the Hungarians wanted him to cede his new fortress at Smederevo. At the instigation of his general, Isak Beg, Sultan Murad prepared to go to war to forestall this event. Mara was well informed about this crisis. She wrote to her father advising him to cede the fortress to the Ottomans and avoid war. It was in vain: in 1439, Murad attacked Smederevo, and the Despot's son Gregory assisted his uncle Thomas Cantacuzenus in an energetic three-month defence. In the end, they had to surrender the fortress, allegedly because the Despot's wife Irene had sold off the city's grain reserves. As a result, Gregory fell into Ottoman hands, but the Sultan, in a benevolent mood, granted Gregory a fief on former Branković estates in Serbia, which he was to share with his brother Stephen, who, it seems, was still detained at Adrianople.

In 1441, George Branković travelled to Zeta (Montenegro) to seek an alliance against the Turks. Accusing Branković's sons of plotting against him and secretly corresponding with their father, Sultan Murad had them thrown in chains and ordered that both young men should be blinded.[86]

The grisly job was performed on 8 May in a gaol for political prisoners at Tokat. Gregory and Stephen were the victims of a palace intrigue. Mara was not supposed to know that her brothers were to be blinded, for fear she would try to help them, but she learned about it and begged her husband on her knees to revoke the punishment – which he did, by sending a fast messenger to Tokat with his order. This did not save Mara's brothers, for the governor at Tokat had anticipated that this might happen, and had the young men blinded before receiving (or ignoring) the Sultan's instruction.[87] Their eyeballs were sent by Murad to their father.[88]

Mara's third intervention in 1444 during the Varna Crusade seems to have been more fruitful. The Crusaders, led by Hunyadi, Vladislav and Branković, retired after the battle of Zlatica, and both sides were willing to consider peace. Murad appears to have employed Mara as a secret go-between. She sent a Greek monk as her envoy to Ragusa (Dubrovnik). After he had arrived there in March, he was sent on by sea to Split and by road to Hungary, where he met the Despot. Bearing in mind the isolation from the outer world imposed by the harem, it is clear that Mara was developing a formidable skill in networking, which she would put to good use for the rest of her life. Her father had been heavily committed to the Crusade, for his troops comprised about a third of the Christian army. His primary concern was to win back his country from the Ottomans, and he secured an agreement that the two sides would start talks. The blind brothers, Stephen and Gregory, were to be sent home. In June, Murad received envoys from Hungary and Serbia, whereupon a ten-year truce was agreed. However, King Laszlo of Hungary never ratified the treaty, so Murad and Branković signed a separate peace, which led to the liberation of Serbia, including Smederevo.[89] Despot Branković was wise enough to stay out of the later, disastrous phase of the crusade, which ended in catastrophe at Varna, and (as we have shown) refused co-operation with Hunyadi's revenge assault that failed at the Second Battle of Kosovo.

Mara liberated

Mara was widowed in 1451 and her husband's successor Sultan Mehmed II, the future conqueror of Constantinople, let her leave his court and return to her father in Smederevo. He was extremely fond of her, and in some of his documents, he referred to her as "my Lady Mother".[90*] She

[*] She was not really his mother; he was born in 1432 and she came to the court at Adrianople in 1435.

left his court burdened with expensive gifts. For her maintenance, Mehmed gave her two fiefs then in Ottoman hands, Toplica and Dubočica, both in the south of Serbia, as sources of income, rather than as places to reside.

As she was now a rich widow who was influential in Ottoman circles, Mara was considered at the Byzantine court as a splendid potential bride for the last Emperor, Constantine XI. Mara's father and stepmother were enthusiastic about this prospective marriage and the union was favoured by the Emperor himself, even though Mara, at an age of at least 37, had probably passed childbearing age. However, she turned Constantine down; she claimed she had promised Murad on oath that if ever she left the harem, she would not re-marry, and would become a nun. Retrospectively, she was regarded as lucky in having escaped the sack of Constantinople, but Sultan Mehmed had great respect and affection for her, and her diplomatic talents were already warmly appreciated. Who knows, maybe by accepting Constantine, she could have changed history? [91]

Her half-sister Katarina was said to have been both pious and beautiful. In 1434, she married Baron Ulrich II, Count of Celje, (in Slovenia) b. 1406, son of the Ban of Slavonia. The Baron was a great landowner and a nephew both of the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick III, and of Barbara, Queen of Hungary. Ulrich and Katarina had a daughter, Elizabeth. Three other children died in infancy. After John Hunyadi's disastrous Kosovo campaign in 1448, Ulrich fell into George Branković's hands. Under the terms of his release, his eldest son Ladislas would be engaged to marry Elizabeth, but would remain with Branković as a hostage. Branković then backed out of this arrangement, for he feared he might lose Murad's goodwill. [92] Still in 1451 the engagement was announced between Elizabeth and Hunyadi's son Matthias, who was to become the great Hungarian King Matthias Corvinus.[93] They were subsequently married. Elizabeth had been raised by Katarina and Ulrich as a Catholic. Despot George brought her over to Orthodoxy, but subsequently allowed her to reconvert to Catholicism, presumably to enter the Hungarian marriage.[94]

In 1453, when Sultan Mehmed took Constantinople, Despot Branković supplied a squad of soldiers to meet his vassal obligation. However, he also arranged to ransom one hundred nuns from slavery.[95] Notwithstanding the Despot's gesture of loyalty, victory at Constantinople encouraged Mehmed to try to re-annex Branković's Despotate of Serbia, which had only been returned to him in 1444. He claimed that the Despot had not paid his annual tribute of 15,000 ducats, and demanded that he should cede

to the Ottomans all the lands that he had inherited from his father, including the Danube fortresses at Golubac and Smederevo. (As the Despot drew 120,000 ducats a year from Novo brdo alone, the financial default seems improbable.) Mehmed mobilized a large army, whereupon Branković fled to Hungary and asked the Hungarians for help. The Sultan attacked Smederevo, which held out against him until Hunyadi arrived at Belgrade with an army. Mehmed decided to besiege the city, but he failed. A tactical withdrawal to Sofia turned into a rout, but his army gutted the Serbian countryside and took 50,000 Serbian captives as it withdrew.

Mehmed was nothing if not tenacious, and in 1455, after a forty-day siege, he captured Novo brdo, the jewel of the Serbian Despotate in Kosovo.[96] The Despot once more tried to open peace negotiations with the Ottomans, but the effort was wasted. Mehmed launched a new expedition against Belgrade, which marched in June 1456, and as previously, attacked Smederevo first. Again, the forces of the Despotate defended successfully, and with Papal backing, John Hunyadi raised a new crusade of 60,000 men. They were a poorly disciplined rabble, but they were inspired to fanatical bravery by Capistrano, a charismatic Franciscan. Before Hunyadi's army could arrive, the Turks surrounded and besieged Belgrade, but Hunyadi broke the siege and then won a massive victory.

He had little time to enjoy this crowning achievement, for on 11 August he died of plague, and was soon followed to the grave by Capistrano. Hunyadi's son Ladislas assumed he could step into his father's shoes, but the Hungarian Parliament instead chose for this post Katarina's husband, Ulrich of Celje. In November 1456, Ulrich rode to Belgrade in the company of his King to take over from Ladislas Hunyadi, but, as the two men rode across the drawbridge, Ladislas' men raised it to isolate them from their entourage. Next day, an altercation broke out between Ladislas, his ally Michael Szilagy, Governor of Belgrade, and Baron Ulrich. It ended in Ulrich's decapitation.[97]

The aged Despot George Branković did not long survive his son-in-law's murder. He fell into conflict with Szilagy, over an attempt by Szilagy to fortify Kovin opposite Smederevo. This was probably to pave the way for an attack on the fortress. Branković naturally opposed this, so Szilagy kidnapped him and his youngest son, Lazar. This was a messy business, in which Szilagy's brother Ladislas was killed, and Lazar fled. Szilagy cut off two of the Despot's fingers and held him for a ransom of 100,000 marks and the fortress of Smederevo. The Despot was willing to pay to get out of Szilagy's hands, but (by different accounts) either his wife Irene or