

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

March 27, 2008

Speakers: Nikolaos Panou (Harvard) and Mona Momescu (University of Constanta)

Topic: *'He will shatter Kings on the Day of His Wrath: Faith, Fear, Power in Early Modern Balkans'* (Panou); *'Between the Slavs and the Greeks: the Lesson Patriarch Niphon Taught Wallachia'* (Momescu)

Respondent: Christine Philliou (Columbia)

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Rapporteur: Karen Emmerich, Columbia University

Attendees: Christine Philliou, Mark Mazower, Karen Van Dyck, Doxis Doxiadis, Gordon Bardos, Radmilla Gorup, Vojislava Filipcevic, Tench Cox, Valentina Izmirlieva, Nikki Leger, Elena Tzelepis, George Fragopoulos

Summary of Presentation:

Nikolaos Panou:

In the decades following the fall of the Byzantine capital, the Patriarch of Constantinople had to become a lay ruler of sorts, with administrative, judicial, and legislative jurisdiction. Meanwhile, the integration of the Balkans under the rule of a single political authority, the Sublime Porte, facilitated the spread of Constantinopolitan religious influence over this large and deeply fragmented area. Yet the role of the Orthodox clergy was undermined by conflicting local interests as well as by Catholic and Protestant aspirations. Panou's talk focused on the case of Niphon II, an ex-patriarch who in the beginning of the sixteenth century became the first Greek-speaking prelate after the fall of Constantinople to be appointed metropolitan of the semi-independent principality of Wallachia; Niphon's presence in Wallachia represents an early instance of the controlling influence that the Great Church sought to exert over the Balkans, but also the hostility and resistance it often had to overcome.

Niphon, who was born in the Peloponnese around 1440, occupied strategic posts in the highest hierarchic spheres of the Church; he served as Patriarch twice, both for brief periods (1486-88, 1497-98), and as archbishop of Wallachia from 1504-05, a post to which he was invited and from which he was soon deposed by Radu the Great, the voivode of Wallachia. He was exiled from the region, lived the rest of his life on Mt. Athos, and was canonized about a decade after his death. Panou's talk engaged with the ways in which Niphon's *vita*—composed in Greek within two decades after his death (1508) by Gabriel, an Athonite *protos*, and subsequently circulated in Romanian and Greek redactions—reflect the convergence of religious and sociopolitical life in Wallachia and the discursive mechanisms by which the Church's role in the region was reinforced. The redactions place emphasis on the encounter between Radu and Niphon in Adrianople, in which Radu is shown asking Niphon for help in bringing order to a degenerated Wallachian populace. They also show Radu as a villain of sorts: after Niphon's assumption, the country is beset by various disasters, and Radu comes down with an illness that soon kills him; Radu's decision to banish the saint is blamed for all

this. On the other hand, another prominent political figure of the time, Neagoe Basarab, who ruled from 1512-1521, is represented time and again as Niphon's "spiritual child." Though just a young noble when he met Niphon, Neagoe had ascended to the throne by the time Gabriel was composing his text, which may in fact have been commissioned by Neagoe himself. In 1515, Neagoe asked Niphon's remains to be translated from Mt. Athos to Wallachia. Two years later, Niphon was canonized, and Neagoe consecrated the cathedral at Curtea de Argeş. These events, too, are incorporated into the *vita*, in both Romanian and Greek versions, which present the return of Niphon's relics to Wallachia through allusions to the return of the relics of St. John Chrysostom to Constantinople. The text thus gave Neagoe a considerable amount of spiritual and political power over the country and its people, while also presenting body of textual evidence for the extent of the Church's influence on socio-political and religious life in Wallachia, as well as of the discursive mechanisms and ideological premises upon which its presence and role in the country had been grounded.

Mona Momescu:

Momescu's talk chose not to approach the *vita* of Niphon from a historical perspective, but instead to present several later Romanian texts, mostly literary, that offer a different point of view. She spoke first about the way that the *Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son, Teodosie*—believed to have been originally written in Romanian, perhaps by Neagoe Basarab himself—has provided a number of stories that were later incorporated into 19th-century historical prose, such as Al. Odobescu's *Mihnea Vodă cel Rău* (Mihnea the Evil). She spoke also of Mihai Eminescu, the national Romanian poet, who in the late 19th century was a supporter of the conservatives and of a pure Romanian identity. Eminescu did not present Niphon as a banished saint so much as an undesired "alogene" figure who had not respected Wallachian customs in going against Radu's plans to marry his sister to an already-married nobleman. For Eminescu and other militants of Romanian-ness in the modern age, Niphon was the epitome of the imperialistic Byzantium, which had been exporting "rulers" to the Romanian principalities.

Momescu also engaged not just with later literary texts that draw on the life of Niphon, but on the secondary criticism written by both Greek and Romanian scholars. Various historians and other scholars in the field of Modern Greek Studies have presented Niphon as an example of Greek-Romanian religious relations, or as one of the political turned religious discourse. Momescu seeks to bring these two approaches together and compare them to Romanian interpretations of Niphon's personality and influence, as well as to the role the redactions of his life played in the history of Romanian literary language and literature. Momescu pointed out that scholars from both the Romanian and Greek sides tend to appropriate the life of the saint: *The Life of St. Niphon* is claimed as a Greek text by Greek scholars, and as a Romanian one by the Romanian scholars; the argument often hinges on the identity of its writer, Gabriel. Generally speaking, Momescu demonstrated the ways in which the text has been used to serve various parties interested in promoting the prevalence of a certain model or identity over others.

Summary of Discussion:

Philliou's commentary:

We need to examine the ecumenical veneer of Orthodoxy that lies at the center of the discussion. For how long had this confluence of Romanian and Byzantine power asserted itself? Perhaps only for a brief moment in the fourteenth-century before the Ottomans, who were already taking over the region, asserted themselves. Mindful of this, it is striking how little we hear of an Ottoman present bearing on these events. Lastly, it is interesting to hear in Momescu's paper the ways Greek/Bulgarian/Romanian perspectives are filtered through reworkings of Niphon's lives. It is worthwhile to speculate what such modern national differentiations add to these accounts.

Q: Do the various accounts make explicit what Niphon was fighting against during his tenure in Romania?

A. Different authors select very different aspects. The Catholic threat is mentioned, but there are no heretical groups cited. Moreover, there is no trace in these accounts of Orthodox dissent that might—were it available—tell us something about the kinds of political opponents who were presenting themselves at the time.

Q. So there is not much evidence that would allow us to provide an ideological dimension to Neagoe's opposition and that of his followers?

A. We know that Neagoe was not a Bassarab, i.e. he did not issue from the family of a Wallachian dynasty. He issues from another clan, whose supporters push him to the throne after killing Radu's younger brother. Clearly, the commissioned text is trying to make subjects believe and forget a set of political events that make the text most questionable.

Q. Who authorized the exhumation of Niphon from Mt. Athos?

A. It was not the Patriarch, but the Abbot of the specific monastery in Mt. Athos.

Q. Why was there not more mention of the Hapsburgs, the Ottomans or the Poles as a threat?

A. Perhaps because the area in question is Wallachia, in the southern region of Romania, and so far from the Hapsburg sphere of influence. Also, the fact that Radu dies so soon after the death of Niphon accentuates the spiritual dimension of the narrative as, in effect, it argues that Radu is punished for his wrongdoing. This flaw in his character far outdoes these political parameters and in the process elevates Neagoe and legitimates his claims to leadership.

Q. An observation: Panou's paper ends with the distinction between esoterika and exoterika, matters of morality or diplomacy, of religion or politics. Your paper implies the ambiguity that exists between the domains of secular administrator and spiritual

leader. A worthwhile suggestion may be to place this distinction at the very beginning of the paper as the paper's key structuring device, and so bring it more to the fore.