"QUE DES CENDRES"
Negative Byzantinism as an Imperial Ideology

Paul Csillag*

Abstract

In this chapter, I will deconstruct *negative Byzantinism* by analyzing Abel-François Villemain's historical novel *Lascaris, ou les Grecs du Quinzième Siècle* (1825). In French Romantic literature at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire symbolized imperial degeneration. As a special form of Orientalism or Mediterraneanism, negative Byzantinism served Latin Christians to belittle Orthodox believers. Western writers used fictionalized tales of the Byzantine Empire as historical analogies to indirectly criticize the allegedly Oriental habits of the nineteenth-century Greeks. As a cultural alternative to Byzantinism, they proposed (Phil-)Hellenism. According to Philhellenes like Villemain, the Greeks ought to honor their Hellenic, ancient heritage and not their Christian, medieval traditions. Since Western authors deemed themselves the heirs of ancient Hellas – because of their supposedly enlightened education and liberal politics – they claimed tutelage over the current Greeks in the form of a historically justified civilizing mission. In contrast, they described the Russian Empire as a poor imitation of degenerate Byzantium unfit to rule its Orthodox coreligionists. Villemain spearheaded this worldview with his novel *Lascaris*. With my analysis of his book, I will demonstrate how the author instrumentalized the notion of Byzantine degeneration and Hellenic progress to argue in favor of French imperialism in the Eastern Mediterranean. The deconstruction of negative Byzantinism and the unveiling of its imperialist connotations is vital for a better understanding of past and present representations of the Byzantine Empire in historiography and historical fiction.

Keywords: Eastern Mediterranean, Historical Fiction, Imperialism, Mediterraneanism, Negative Byzantinism

> But the subjects of the Byzantine Empire, who assume and dishonour the names both of Greeks and Romans, present a dead uniformity of abject vices, which are neither softened by the weakness of humanity, nor animated by the vigour of memorable crimes. […] A succession of priests and superstition: their views are narrow; their judgement is feeble or corrupt; […].[1]

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* European University Institute in Florence

1 Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. H. H. Milman, vol. 3 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1847), 284.

Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) held the Byzantine Empire in low esteem. The author of the by-now legendary historiography *The History of the Fall and Decline of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789) described the development of the Eastern Roman Empire as a slow process of degeneration and decay. Gibbon declared that the Byzantines continued the history of the Greeks and the Romans – the putative supreme civilizations of Mediterranean antiquity – only in name. According to the eminent historian, Byzantine culture was coined by "vices," "weakness," and "memorable crimes." For the British historian, the Byzantines' eventual downfall had been precipitated by the corrosion of their civilization, arts, and science. In his eyes, the heirs to the Romans and Greeks were subdued by the Ottomans in 1453 because of a deviation from their former ways.

In this chapter, I define Gibbon's act of pejoratively describing the Eastern Roman Empire as "negative Byzantinism." It is important to apply a closer scrutiny to this concept since Gibbon's ideas were influential in the academic and popular historiography of the coming centuries. Especially French novelists of Romanticism appreciated his evaluation of the late Roman Empire. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, various authors wrote about the demise of the so-called *Bas Empire*. Romantic novelists and historiographers – then categories difficult to separate – redeployed Gibbon's vision of the Byzantines. This common fascination for the Eastern Roman Empire raises the question of why European writers were attracted by its history and why they so eagerly imbibed negative Byzantinism.

To respond to this question, I will analyze the historical novel *Lascaris* by Abel-François Villemain (1825).[2] Other works, such as Count Vaublanc's *Le dernier des Césars* (1819), or Collin de Plancy's *La prise de Constantinople par Mahomet II* (1819), could also have been selected.[3] However, the novel *Lascaris* was the most popular book dealing with Byzantine history in the French 1820s and thus, constitutes an ideal source. An anonymous reviewer stated in the contemporary newspaper *La Pandore*: "We know that the author of *Lascaris* was one of the first to support this unlucky [Greek] nation whose destiny has caused pity among all Europeans."[4] Another critic writing for *Le Corsaire* remarked: "Without a doubt,

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2 Abel-François Villemain, *Lascaris, ou les Grecs du quinzième siècle* (Pris : Ladvocat, 1825).

3 J. A. S. Collin de Plancy, *La prise de Constantinople par Mahomet II* (Paris: P. Mongie Ainé, 1819); Vincent-Maria Viénot de Vaublanc, *Le dernier des Césars; ou, La chute de l'empire romain* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1819).

4 "Mélanges littéraires de M. Villemain" *La Pandore*, Septembre 24, 1827, 3.

no one else but the author of *Lascaris* could make us fully understand the great personalities of antiquity.”[5] These are but two of many voices in the choir singing the novelist’s praise.

My analysis ought to visualize how Villemain instrumentalized Gibbon’s dichotomy between bad Byzantines and good antiquity to argue in favor of French imperialism in the Mediterranean. First, I will explain the author’s idea of negative Byzantinism, before illustrating how he used the concept to, on the one hand, promote French Hellenism, and on the other, decry Russian Byzantinism. Instead of focusing on the literary aspects of the novel, the analysis will mainly target Villemain’s political incentives. The goal is to unveil what ideological worldview motivated nineteenth-century novelists to publish historical fiction on the Byzantine Empire.

Following the ideas of D. A. Angelos, Helena Bodin, and Cyril Mango, we can understand negative Byzantinism as a derogatory Othering of the Byzantine Empire.[6] Already in its origins, the term “Byzantine Empire” was used to *other* the late Romans, which means to present its inhabitants as uncultured and morally depraved foreigners as well as exotic opposites to the supposedly Occidental Hellenes of antiquity. The epithet was created retrospectively by the sixteenth-century historian Hieronymus Wolf, who used the term to differentiate between ancient Greek texts, which he loved, and medieval Greek writings, which he hated. Throughout early modernity and beyond, negative Byzantinism helped Latin authors express their admiration for Greek antiquity by comparing it with its medieval equivalent. In this Western literary tradition, Byzantium and Hellas appeared like night and day.[7]

In its function, negative Byzantinism dovetails with the phenomena of Orientalism or Mediterraneanism.[8] As temporally and geographically distant foreigners, the Byzantines served as a counterimage to the Western self. By

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5 “Nouveaux mélanges historiques et littéraires, par M. Villemain,” *Le Corsaire*, February 19, 1827, 2.

6 Helena Bodin, “Whose Byzantinism – Ours or Theirs? On the Issue of Byzantinism from a Cultural Semiotic Perspective,” in *The Reception of Byzantium in European Culture since 1500*, ed. Przemysław Marciniak and Dion Smythe (London: Routledge, 2016), 16-19; Cyril Mango, “Byzantinism and Romantic Hellenism,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 28 (1965): 32.

7 Hans-Georg Beck, *Ideen und Realitaeten in Byzanz. Gesammelte Aufsaetze*, Variorum Reprint ; CS 13 (London: Variorum Reprints, 1972), 169-93; Leonora Neville, *Guide to Byzantine Historical Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

8 David Lawton, “1453 and the Stream of Time,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2007): 471.

describing the Christian East as exotic as well as uncivilized, Catholics and Protestants sought to elevate their own identity. Famously, Edward Said defined Orientalism as a rhetorical method through which Western intellectuals belittled the Orient as a cultural Other.[9] Michael Herzfeld developed Mediterraneanism as an equivalent that rather focused on the basin south of Europe instead of the landmass to its east.[10] Both concepts, however, converged in their definition and geographical scope. Negative Byzantinism may be comprehended as a side branch of these literary traditions. The qualities ascribed to the Byzantines overlapped with the stereotypical image drawn of other allegedly Oriental or Mediterranean people. Among these tropes, an enigmatic allure, a proclivity to treacherous behavior, and religious superstition were central.[11] Like Orientalism, negative Byzantinism was promulgated particularly through the historical novel. Both concepts depended heavily on biased interpretations of history. The fictional and popular style of the novel was ideal for mixing putative facts with broad generalizations and skewed images of past realities. Often, these alterations of history facilitated the creation of imperialist narratives.[12]

The connection between historical fiction and nineteenth-century imperialism in the Mediterranean has already been under repeated scrutiny. In the Greek case, the so-called Philhellenes – Western idealists inspired by Hellenic history – were partially identified by scholars such as Andrekos Varnava as imperialists. Their ideology became popular during the Greek Revolution between 1821 and 1829.[13] Instead of concentrating on Hellenism, the love for ancient Greek art, or Philhellenism, its political equivalent connected to the idea of Greek independence, I focus on its complementary narrative, negative Byzantinism. While Philhellenism advertised a Western intervention in the Greek war by evoking utopian images of ancient Greece, negative Byzantinism had a more sinister message. The latter implied that Greece could impossibly rule itself because

9 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

10 Michael Herzfeld, *Ours Once More. Folklore, Ideology, and the Making of Modern Greece* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).

11 Bodin, "Whose Byzantinism," 12; Brian R. Hamnett, *The Historical Novel in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Representations of Reality in History and Fiction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 97; Diana Mishkova, *Rival Byzantiums. Empire and Identity in Southeastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 11, 16-17.

12 Said, *Orientalism*.

13 Andrekos Varnava, "British and Greek Liberalism and Imperialism in the Long Nineteenth Century," in *Liberal Imperialism in Europe*, ed. Matthew P. Fitzpatrick (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2012).

of its degenerate Byzantine heritage and needed the West to reacquire its Hellenic civilization, which promised progress and wealth. Since the Byzantines served as an Other to both the West and the ancient Hellenes, they connected these constructed civilizations through common adversity. The half-Western, half-Hellenic cultural program ought to replace Byzantine and Orthodox customs. Eastern Christendom and Byzantine rituals, so the idea, constituted a medieval residual and simultaneously Oriental influence that stood for backwardness. In their combined form, Hellenism and negative Byzantinism ought to prove the necessity of a Western tutelage over a new Greek state. This article argues that negative Byzantinism functioned as a supplement to positive Philhellenism, which ultimately justified the Mediterranean imperialism of the nineteenth century.[14]

The Fall from Olympus: Negative Byzantinism

Abel-François Villemain (1790-1870), linguist and writer, had been infatuated with ancient Greece ever since he attended the *Lycée*. The wealth of his father, a merchant and landowner, enabled the future novelist to study in Paris, while others fought in the Napoleonic Wars. In school, Villemain rapidly distinguished himself by reciting Greek verses and staging his own Hellenic plays.[15] Contemporaries described him as somewhat ugly, insecure, and unable to handle criticism. Yet, when Villemain could display his knowledge of languages and culture, he excelled.[16] Upon the eruption of the Greek Revolution in 1821, Villemain was a grown man, known author, and influential academic.[17] He had commenced to teach as a professor at the Sorbonne and strove to revive – among other things – idealized Hellenic culture through education. The erudite scholar would also dabble in politics, becoming a member of the French parliament. In Villemain’s eyes,

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14 With the term Mediterranean imperialism, I subsume all political action that aimed at the territorial, cultural, or economic conquest of the Mediterranean as a constructed region on behalf of specific empires. This observation has spawned many valuable academic publications in recent years. See for example: Manuel Borutta and Sakis Gekas, “A Colonial Sea. The Mediterranean, 1798-1956,” in *European Review of History* 19, no. 1 (2012): 1-13.

15 Germain Sarrut and Edme Théodore Bourg, *Biographie des hommes du jour, industriels* ... (Paris: H. Krabe, 1835), 63.

16 J. D. Malavié, “Hugo et Villemain: un demi-siècle d’amitié littéraire,” *Aevum* 46, no. 3 (1972): 237-282; J. D. Malavié, “Abel Villemain en verve. Malices et sourires d’un universitaire du siècle passé,” *Aevum* 57, no. 3 (1983): 450-462.

17 Sarrut and Saint-Edme, *Biographie*, 65.

the Greek Revolution constituted a chance to reinstitute a civilized state on the Peloponnese and called for radical action. His honest allegiance to Philhellenic ideology is proven by his early entry into the Parisian Philhellenic society, which he joined as a founding member in 1823.[18] Eventually, he decided to promote the cause through his craft as a writer.

In 1825, Villemain published *Lascaris*. The story circles the Byzantine nobleman Konstantinos Lascaris (1435-1501) who fled the Fall of Constantinople in 1453. This fictionalized hero based on a historical figure rescues the Hellenic masterworks from alleged Turkish barbarity and brings them to Italy. The plot focuses on the travels of Lascaris and his interactions with Latin Westerners. Throughout the book, the protagonist describes current Byzantium as the degenerate rest of glorious Hellas.

> Sadly, the arts are the prettiest adornment of my people and the only thing it leaves for the future; but the arts do not triumph over the corruption of law, they succumb to it. For numerous centuries, we have died a slow death because of our *gouvernement tyrannique* and the aging of our society. […] Still young, when I saw our *querelles religieuses*, the weakness of our empire, the luxury of our magnates, I turned to study the monuments of another age, whose language we maintain, but which we cannot equal anymore. […] In our fallen people, the model of the *grand et du beau* remained conserved, but sterile and without imitators; it enriched our archives but did not inspire us anymore.[19]

The Greek scholar narrates how his "people" had once been prosperous and cultured. Melancholically, he admires the "monuments of another age" and the Constantinopolitan archives filled with ancient masterpieces. The erudite hero draws the image of a "fallen people" who revels in former glories while the present is coined by depravity. Villemain communicated through the words of his protagonist the concept of an "aging society." Lascaris circumscribed the author's idea of the steady decay of a once blossoming civilization until its eventual eclipse. In the Byzantine Empire, Hellenic wisdom was "maintain[ed]," "conserved," "and enclosed," but not further developed. The Eastern Roman Empire continued to preserve what it had inherited but could make no use of it. The century-long process of degeneration resembled a slow death (*nous mourions de langueur*), a continuous decay from antiquity to the end of the Middle Ages.[20]

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18 Armand, "Villemain," *Journal de Paris*, January 28, 1839.
19 Villemain, *Lascaris*, 17-20. All translations are my own.
20 David Lawton, "1453," 469; Marios Hatzopoulos, "Receiving Byzantium in Early Modern Greece (1820s-1840s)," in *Héritages de Byzance en Europe du Sud-Est*

For Villemain, the cause of this degeneration was to be found in Byzantine "vice." As a first reason for the fall of the Greek civilization, he adduced the "corruption of law" which would contaminate "the arts." The author saw a close link between society's high culture and jurisdiction, implying that an immoral bureaucracy and court system led to impure literature and vice versa. This argument fits Villemain's general narrative. As a Sorbonne professor-cum-parliamentarian, he maintained that culture and education provided the ability to rule justly but that, reversely, these entities needed a just rule to blossom. By drawing up such a chicken-and-egg scenario, the novelist explained the degeneration of Greek arts during the Middle Ages through their corruption by Byzantine politics. Simultaneously, Villemain made an argument for the importance of Hellenic art, insinuating that mastering it could foster just governance. It surprises not that a teacher of ancient Greek would make such a statement.

Secondly, through the words of fictional Lascaris, the author complained about the tyrannic rule (*gouvernement tyrannique*) of the Byzantine emperors. To ascribe Oriental tyranny to late Roman monarchs was common in the nineteenth century.[21] Under the term 'Caesaropapism,' historians and professional Byzantinists proposed that the head of the Byzantine realm had extraordinary, even absolute control over both his state as well as the Orthodox church.[22] This manner of governing the country was deemed despotic. In the 1820s, liberal Christians such as Villemain – increasingly used to a separation of secular and ecclesiastical power – saw their fusion in one person as problematic. To the outsider, it appeared as if the Byzantine emperor similar to the Ottoman sultan handled both the spiritual as well as political spheres of their realms, which would cause an impurification of both. This generalizing perception neglected the roles of other offices, such as the patriarch.[23] Implicitly, the figure of an all-controlling Byzantine *pan-*

à l'époque moderne et contemporaine, ed. Olivier Delouis, Anne Couderc, and Petre Guran (Athens: École française d'Athènes, 2013), 219-29.

21 On the Oriental character ascribed to the Greeks in Romantic literature: Domna Moyseos, "Philhellenism as an Exploration of Identity and Alterity in the Literary Tradition of Travels to the East in the 19th Century," in *Concepts and Functions of Philhellenism*, ed. Martin Vöhler, Stella Alekou, and Miltos Pechlivanos (Berlin: Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 155.

22 Deno J. Geanakoplos, "Church and State in the Byzantine Empire. A Reconsideration of the Problem of Caesaropapism," *Church History* 34, no. 4 (1965): 381, 399.

23 Moussa Sarga, "Méhémet-Ali au miroir des voyageurs français en Egypte," *Romantisme* 130 (2003): 19-20; Caroline Franklin, "'Some Samples of the Finest Orientalism.' Byronic Philhellenism and Proto-Zionism at the Time of the Congress of Vienna," in *Romanticism and Colonialism. Writing and Empire, 1780-*

tocrator ought to oppose alleged Hellenic ideals, such as republicanism, democracy, or liberal constitutionalism, for which the young Villemain harbored a certain sympathy. In the discourse of monarchic France, his then-provocative political ideas had to remain between the lines.

Thirdly, the allegedly constant religious conflicts (*querelles religieuses*) would have impeded the progress of the medieval Greek state. Instead of occupying themselves with urgent matters, the Byzantines ostensibly preferred to quarrel over ecclesiastic laws. At this point, Villemain – himself a moderate liberal – evoked the ideas of Gibbon, using superstition as a common trope to attack the Eastern Roman Empire. Both authors saw the Orthodox Church as a source of disunity and inefficiency, which finally cost the Roman emperors their throne. According to the Sorbonne professor, the Eastern Church was "a religion that made gullible and immobile."[24] Fourthly, the French novelist anathematized the "luxury of Byzantine magnates." As a usual marker of Oriental depravity and indicator of decadence, the luxury of the upper classes was a popular accusation leveled against the *bas empire*. Again, Villemain maintained that instead of occupying themselves with crucial political questions or fine arts, the powerful of the Eastern Roman Empire only paid attention to trivial and egocentric issues. For Villemain, the Byzantine lust for earthly pleasures contrasted with the stoic and literally Spartan values of Greek antiquity.[25]

Throughout the book, it becomes clear that negative Byzantinism constituted an essential requisite of Villemain's Philhellenic narrative. In his historical thinking, the Hellenes and the Byzantines enter a complicated temporal, genealogical relationship. They were simultaneously qualitative opposites and biological relatives. The author ascribed to them a drastic difference in civilizational value while defining both societies as changing phases of the same national, Greek teleology. His Hellenes represented an original ideal, whereas the Byzantines symbolized their medieval downfall. To explain this discrepancy, Villemain deployed the historiographical concept of 'degeneration.'[26] The image of an at first young and pristine but

1830, ed. Peter J. Kitson and Timothy Fulford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 228-29.

24 Villemain, *Lascaris*, 55.

25 Przemysław Marciniak and Dion Smythe, "Introduction," in *The Reception of Byzantium in European Culture since 1500* (Farnham; Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2015), 2.

26 Mishkova, *Rival Byzantiums*, 13; Peter J. Kitson, "Romanticism and Colonialism. Races, Places, Peoples, 1785-1800," in *Romanticism and Colonialism. Writing and Empire, 1780-1830*, ed. Peter J. Kitson and Timothy Fulford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 19; Thomas W. Gallant, *Experiencing Do-*

then old, decadent, and frail civilization offered him an explanation for the dissimilarity between his ancient heroes and their medieval descendants. The narrative of an aging society seemed natural and understandable to a broader audience. By positioning different periods – Hellenic antiquity, Byzantine Middle Ages, and Greek present – next to each other, Villemain turned diachronic spaces into a synchronic ontology, making use of the time-bridging function of the historical novel.

Historians and novelists of the early nineteenth century repeatedly projected this teleological idea onto the Byzantine Empire. According to Gibbon, the Byzantine Empire constituted the final phase of Roman civilization.[27] Villemain reappropriated this idea and applied it to Greek history.[28] While he was not the only author to do so, his work was the most successful book of its kind. The Byzantine Empire symbolized Roman and, simultaneously, Greek degeneration. Its eventual – according to the author – inevitable demise in 1453 at the hands of the Ottomans meant the end of Mediterranean supremacy, which had shaped Europe and the Middle East throughout antiquity.

The novel, only around 150 pages long, essentially consists of a repetition of this narrative explained by the hero, Lascaris. Structured like a conversation between the protagonist and less knowledgeable characters, the plot is reminiscent of books from former centuries in which a young student and an old teacher exchange words about love, religion, or philosophy. Authors from different eras and backgrounds, such as Judah Leon Abravanel, François Fénelon, and Christoph Martin Wieland, used this stylistic gadget for didactic purposes.[29] Inserting moral theories into fictional dialogues turned sometimes-dry lemmas into interesting conversations. Especially in texts that were meant to be emulations of the Hellenic classics, morally superior teachers guide the books’ protagonists. Fénelon’s Télémaque, for example, heeds the advice of Athena disguised as “Men-

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minion. Culture, Identity and Power in the British Mediterranean (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 19-24.

27 Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1857), 69, 75, 121, 122, 163, 175, 231, 268, 352, 365, 481; Jonathan Theodore, *The Modern Cultural Myth of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016).

28 Villemain was familiar with Gibbon and even held lectures on his writings. See: “Guizot’s Edition of Gibbon,” *The Quarterly Review* 41 (1833): 278-86.

29 Leone Ebreo, *Dialoghi d’amore*, ed. Delfina Giovannozzi (Roma ; Bari: Gius, Laterza & Figli, 2014); Christoph Schmitt-Maaß, “Vom politischen Ideal zum politischen Idyll. Die Rezeption von Fénelons Télémaque durch Haller und Wieland,” *Publications of the English Goethe Society* 87, no. 1 (2018): 24-34.

tor."[30] The moral authority of old teachers communicated a traditionalist doctrine in which it was paramount to follow the advice of the ancients. Hellas became the ultimate symbol for this retrograde worldview and narrative of civilizational continuities.

Yet, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, multiple Romantics rebelled against this traditionalist order. In Thomas Hope's *Anastasius*, Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and François-René de Chateaubriand's *Itinéraire,* no authoritarian mentor accompanies the youthful protagonists.[31] Instead of fetishizing ancient traditions, this new generation of writers melancholically bemoaned the demise of the Roman and Greek empires. The ruins they encountered around the Mediterranean and in the so-called Orient reminded them of the fleeting nature of human achievements and made them question existing social orders. Concepts of slow decay followed by the sudden disappearance of civilizations, so often exemplified by Gibbon's Byzantines, disagreed with the exaltation of long-lasting traditions favored by more conservative thinkers. Ironically, it was the alleged wildness and decay that enticed the Romantics' fascination for the southern sea and the Orient. Although the likes of Byron and Chateaubriand shared their fascination for everything Hellenic with classical conservatives, their first-hand impression of the nineteenth-century Mediterranean made them experience a sensation of loss. Erring around the eastern basin, they sought an answer to the question of how the powers of antiquity succumbed to the wheel of time.[32]

The novel *Lascaris* must be identified as a synthesis of classical and Romantic writings, traditionalist and progressive politics. It constituted a reaction to the recent vogue of Romantic and Mediterraneanist travelogues. Instead of telling the classical story of a pupil escorted by an all-knowing mentor or the Romantic tale of a guideless traveler, Villemain combined both archetypical protagonists. Villemain's hero, Lascaris, is simultaneously a classical teacher full of Hellenic wisdom and a disillusioned refugee who melancholically roams the basin. By adding

30 François de Salignac de La Mothe- Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Télémaque, Fils d'Ulysse* (London: Jean Hofhout, 1765).

31 Thomas Hope, *Anastasius, or, Memoirs of a Greek*, 3rd ed. (London: John Murray, 1820); George Gordon Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (London: John Murray, 1837); François-René de Chateaubriand, *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem et de Jérusalem à Paris, en allant par la Grèce, et revenant par l'Egypte, la Barbarie et l'Espagne*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Le Normant, 1811).

32 Compare: Jonathan Sachs, *The Poetics of Decline in British Romanticism*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

negative Byzantinism to Philhellenic euphoria, the author argued that the Eastern Mediterranean could be both the cradle of civilization and Oriental wildness. Despite past degeneration, ancient knowledge and classical traditions would remain valuable in the present. Ephemeral vices as in the Byzantine case could lead to civilizational decay, but the ideas and arts of ancient Hellas would last throughout the ages. This narrative can be subsumed as moderate, both in the literary and political sense, allowing notions of continuity and rupture, of conservative teleology and radical, cyclic historiography. To sell his book, Villemain rendered its plot digestible for conservatives and radicals alike. The amalgam of Philhellenism and negative Byzantinism enabled the moderate parliamentarian, Romantic author, and teacher of classics to arbitrate between different views on history and thus, politics.

Since Villemain's hero figured as a teacher and not as a self-doubting youngster, his words became all the more powerful. Where other authors chose a contradictive, inquiring style, the ideas of Lascaris were presented in the novel as unquestionable prophecies. Because of this, the novel resembles less a coherent story and more a series of philosophical lectures. However, these ideas stemmed not from the historical figure but from the nineteenth-century novelist. Lascaris transformed into a literary alter ego for the author. While Villemain depicted his putative spiritual ancestor as the bringer of Hellenic enlightenment in early modernity, he represented himself as Lascaris' reincarnation in the present. The assumption that Villemain sought to indoctrinate his readership with a Philhellenic ideology rather than to tell a gripping story is corroborated by the 250-page long epilogue. The much shorter novelesque part of the book appears as a veneer for the following commentary. Here, the author connects his unfavorable appraisal of the historical Byzantines to present politics, such as the Greek Revolution or the Eastern Question. The novel served to develop negative Byzantinism as a valuable historical argument for an imperialist Philhellenic narrative, which promoted a Western control of current Greece in opposition to other pretenders such as Orthodox Russia.

A mission civilisatrice to the Cradle of Civilization

In 1825, Villemain was presented with a conundrum. To promote a Western intervention in the Greek Revolution, he had to explain why the present inhabitants of the Peloponnese were so different from their Hellen-

ic forefathers. After all, most of Europe's involvement was propagated as a mission to rescue the descendants of Leonidas, Plato, and Socrates. The many Western volunteers and donors who supported the Philhellenic cause were motivated by tales of antiquity. If the current Greeks were not related to their ancient counterparts, as the Tyrolian scholar Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer argued, or if Greeks, in general, were not the superhuman specimens they were claimed to be, the idea of a rescue mission would lose most of its appeal. French enthusiasm for a Western intervention in the Revolution rose and fell with the conviction that the rebels were indeed the scions of the likes of Alexander the Great.[33]

Villemain sought to counter the criticism raised against Philhellenic ideology through negative Byzantinism.

> […] it is normal to ask oneself, where this forgotten people had been, suddenly resuscitated back to life after so many centuries. In the historical sources, the fifteenth-century Greeks appear as different from those of today as ashes to the essence of life (*que des cendres le sont de la vie*). We [Villemain] have tried to paint them [the Byzantines] as a people who is about to die […]. It is from this pompous void that a half-barbarian Greek race reappears, mutilated by the stigma and vice of long servitude but who has preserved its faith and rediscovered courage.[34]

The author's Byzantinist formulations cued not only a dichotomy between Byzantines and Westerners as well as Hellenes, but also between Byzantines and nineteenth-century Greeks. According to the professor, the current Greek-speaking Christians under Ottoman rule were the heirs of the heroic Hellenes but also of the medieval Byzantines. Villemain made the latter's vice and degeneration the cause of the disparity between the barbaric Greeks of 1825 and their imagined Hellenic ancestors.[35] In his opinion, current savagery was the product of centuries of Byzantine and Ottoman misrule. Yet, the new Greeks would be completely "different" from their medieval forefathers and hence, more receptive to Hellenic or

33 St Clair, *That Greece Might Still Be Free*, 351.

34 Abel-François Villemain, *Lascaris, ou les Grecs du quinzième siècle,* 3rd ed (Paris: Ladvocat, 1826), IX.

35 Ioannis Koubourlis, "Augustin Thierry et l'« Hellénisation » de l'Empire byzantin jusqu'à 1853. Les dettes des historiographes de la Grèce médiévale et moderne à l'école libérale française," in *Héritages de Byzance en Europe du Sud-Est à l'époque moderne et contemporaine*, ed. Anne Couderc, Olivier Delouis, and Petre Guran, Mondes Méditerranéens et Balkaniques (MMB) (Athens: École française d'Athènes, 2021), 8.

Western innovation. Villemain's nineteenth-century Greeks were uncivilized but also "courage[ous]," heroic, and full of potential. In the author's eyes, the nation had come full circle in its development. From primitive beginnings, it would have risen to a civilizational height during antiquity, declined under the Byzantines and Ottomans to become yet again a primitive tribe. The excited Philhellene wrote that the rebels of the 1820s were like "these Greek refugees from Byzantium three centuries ago" but that "[t]his time, they will not be theologians and scholars, the debris of an aged people, but children of heroes."[36] This cyclic logic implied that the Greeks would now reemerge from their Byzantine ashes like a Hellenic phoenix and become a blossoming nation once more.[37]

To do so, the Greeks would have to reject their Oriental, Byzantine heritage. According to Villemain, "[i]t was an example for the barbaric life of the Middle Ages that continued in modern Greece."[38] Keeping their allegedly medieval customs would again lead to de- and not regeneration. In this Philhellenic narrative, Hellenism symbolized a golden past as well as a prosperous future.[39] Byzantinism, conversely, represented a miserable past and an avoidable future. Villemain insinuated that because the Greeks found themselves again at point zero of their civilizational development, they had the opportunity to choose which cultural legacy to pursue. To emerge as a successful nation in the nineteenth century, the Greeks ought to accept Western Hellenism and eschew their current Byzantine traditions. Through this argumentation, Villemain created, on the one hand, a connection between ancient Hellas and present Greece. On the other, he criticized the latter's allegedly Oriental and medieval culture.[40] In the liberal author's narrative, Byzantine degeneration equaled a cultural partition between the Greek rebels and their true Hellenic self. With this argumentative trick, the author tried to dispel the fear that the current Greeks might not be related

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36 Villemain, *Lascaris*, XIII-XIV.

37 In his cyclic presentation of history, Villemain is reminiscent of later household names of civilizational history, such as Nikolay Danilevsky, Oswald Spengler, and Arnold Toynbee. See: Dimitrios Stamatopoulos, "From the Vyzantism of K. Leont'ev to the Vyzantinism of I. I. Sokolov. The Byzantine Orthodox East as a Motif of Russian Orientalism," in *Héritages de Byzance en Europe du Sud-Est à l'époque Moderne et Contemporaine*, ed. Anne Couderc, Olivier Delouis, and Petre Guran, Mondes Méditerranéens et Balkaniques (MMB) (Athens: École française d'Athènes, 2021), 22.

38 Villemain, *Lascaris*, 210.

39 Constanze Guthenke, *Placing Modern Greece. The Dynamics of Romantic Hellenism, 1770-1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 124.

40 Compare: Mango, "Byzantinism," 32.

to the ancient heroes and, at the same time, advocated their Hellenization because of an alleged cultural estrangement from their superior ancestors. This disposition helped Villemain to conjecture a Western civilizing mission to the Peloponnese.

To justify French incursions during the Greek Revolution, the Sorbonne professor linked imagined Hellas to Western liberalism. This rhetorical tour de force depended on the concept of negative Byzantinism. According to the French Philhellene, Occidental states such as France, represented the spiritual heirs of Mediterranean antiquity instead of the Byzantine Orthodox.[41] The essential message of his novel was that the scholar Lascaris transported the knowledge of the ancient Hellenes into the West, where, unlike in the case of the Byzantine Empire, it fell on fertile ground. "*La curiosité savante*, by which the whole of Europe was captured in the sixteenth century, made gazes slide to those famous lands where all arts came from."[42] Because of this relocation of Hellenic civilization, the West had allegedly a better right to identify with Greek antiquity than the people living in the region. According to Villemain, Occidental modernity was a continuation of utopian antiquity, whereas Byzantine culture represented its opposite.

The scholar Stathis Gourgouris has recently shown how European Philhellenes colonized and appropriated the Hellenic past to justify their imperialist endeavors in the Eastern Mediterranean.[43] Through this alleged *translatio spiritus*, Latin Christians positioned themselves as the heirs of Hellas, while they dismissed similar claims of the Orthodox currently populating the Aegean. "Hidden under the self-given name *Romaioï*, the Greeks had only a vague notion of their antiquities. They thought their country had been inhabited by pagan giants. They better conserved Christian traditions mixed with fabricated tales and strange costumes. Like every primitive people, they had many religious feasts."[44] Arguing with spiritual kinship, Villemain asserted that it was Europe's duty and right to interfere in the Greek Revolution on the grounds of its historical link to Mediterranean antiquity. According to the Philhellenic lobbyist, the West could claim sovereignty over Greece since Latin intellectuals preserved the Hellenic heritage in opposition to the presumed biological descendants. It would be the

41 Abel-François Villemain, *Études d'histoire moderne* (Paris: Didier, 1856), 329-30.
42 Villemain, *Lascaris*, 186.
43 Stathis Gourgouris, *Dream Nation. Enlightenment, Colonization and the Institution of Modern Greece, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 7.
44 Villemain, *Lascaris*, 255.

responsibility of the Occident to re-civilize the "*demi-barbare*" Greeks of the nineteenth century with the wisdom of their own ancestors. Villemain interpreted, somewhat haughtily, Western imperialism in the Aegean as a mission to teach the Greeks their own history and culture that they had lost during Byzantine times.

Although the author pledged to love liberty, he equally played with the idea of a French (re)occupation of the Peloponnese and its surrounding islands. As was usual for liberal authors of the beginning nineteenth century, Villemain advocated this imperialist policy with notions of civilization and humanitarianism.[45] He reminded his readership of the allegedly positive effects that French control over the Ionian Islands achieved during the Napoleonic Wars: "After the big war of 1807, the treaty of Tilsit gave this Italian conquest to France. Here, the French administration was *douce* and protective. She pleased the Greek spirit because of her artistic proselytism and scientific institutions which she had still with her although she stopped to propagate liberty."[46] In this citation, the author sees the French army as a bringer of arts and science in the Mediterranean. For him, these two aspects constituted Europe's Hellenic heritage in its essential form. Because French arts and science were natural to Greek soil, the "Greek spirit" would readily accept France's tutelage. This positive relationship, according to Villemain, could be maintained even if liberty was taken out of the equation. Contrary to his Philhellenic narrative, the Sorbonne Professor seems to forgo the idea of a free Greek state in favor of French imperialism. The author made clear that France's right to intervene in the Greek Revolution and rule the Eastern Mediterranean was rather based on the empire's mastery of arts and science than its love for freedom.

Member of the Philhellenic committee in Paris, Villemain envisioned a replacement of Greece's negative Byzantine customs with Hellenic and Western enlightenment. This intervention was to be of a military but also intellectual nature. It becomes apparent that Villemain wanted the West to export its know-how to Greece and the latter to accept the offer. With the title of his monograph, *Dangerous Gifts*, Hilmi Ozan Özavcı has recently

45 Alexis Heraclides and Ada Dialla, *Humanitarian Intervention in the Long Nineteenth Century. Setting the Precedent* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); Fabian Klose, *In the Cause of Humanity a History of Humanitarian Intervention in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Human Rights in History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

46 Villemain, *Lascaris*, 363-64.

uncovered the double-faced nature of such proposals.[47] Implicitly, the liberal politician Villemain advertised a Western (and most of all French) influence in the eastern Mediterranean, which he declared a mission to reestablish ancient Hellas. According to the Parisian intellectual, European tutelage over Greece did not only serve to protect it from the Ottoman enemy but also to infuse a more progressive, European civilization into the reborn nation. The historian Varnava defined the justification of intrusions into Ottoman territories through a constructed Western connection to Hellas as 'neoclassical spiritual imperialism.'[48] Villemain's novel might be considered an unofficial summary of this concept. Yet, not only French Philhellenes sought to mobilize history to strengthen their claim to the Eastern Mediterranean.

Poisoned Heritage: Lascaris as a Pamphlet against Russian Byzantinism

The Russian tsars traditionally styled themselves the successors of the Byzantine emperors. It could be easily argued that shared Orthodox Christendom gave the rulers in Constantinople and the Muscovites a common religious as well as cultural link. After the fall of the city to the Ottomans in 1453, the tsars assumed the role of the Orthodox hegemon.[49] As a logical consequence, they declared Eastern Christians to be under their protection. This declaration included their own subjects but also Orthodox living under foreign rule, such as the Ottoman Greeks. By positioning themselves as the legitimate heirs of the Byzantine emperors and the defenders of vulnerable religious minorities in the Eastern Mediterranean, Russian monarchs gained a convincing *casus belli* against the Ottomans. As a constant doctrine of foreign politics, the identification with the Eastern Roman emperors spurned the tsars to repeated invasions of the sultan's territories.[50] During the 1770s and 1820s, Russia's government tried again to harness Byzantine heritage to justify their aggressive mingling in Ottoman politics. Utilizing their self-ascribed position as the guardians of Eastern Christen-

47 Hilmi Ozan Özavcı, *Dangerous Gifts. Imperialism, Security, and Civil Wars in the Levant, 1798-1864* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

48 Varnava, "British and Greek Liberalism," 221.

49 Hélène Ahrweiler, "Conférence inaugurale - La présence de Byzance," in *Héritages de Byzance en Europe du Sud-Est à l'époque moderne et contemporaine*, ed. Anne Couderc, Olivier Delouis, and Petre Guran, Mondes Méditerranéens et Balkaniques (MMB) (Athens: École française d'Athènes, 2021), 15-21.

50 Sergey A. Ivanov, "Second Rome as Seen by the Third. Russian Debates on 'the Byzantine Legacy,'" in *The Reception of Byzantium in European Culture since 1500*, ed. Przemysław Marciniak and Dion Smythe (London: Routledge, 2016), 58-59.

dom, Russian imperialists argued that their intrusion into Ottoman territories only served the safety of the persecuted Greeks.[51] Byzantinism, hence, occupied a completely different position in Russian political discourse. Instead of a pejorative Othering, the tsars and their courtiers understood it as a justification for their interference in Ottoman affairs and as an important part of their imperial identity.[52]

In his treatise, Villemain agreed that the Russian and Byzantine Empires shared important cultural and religious tenets: "The power of the Byzantine synod was not limited to the Greeks. It stretched over multiple nations […]. From here stems this at-first-sight strange connection between the Greeks and the *Moscovites*, this old and stubborn tradition that makes the Greeks hope to be saved by the Russians."[53] The author's judgment of this tradition, however, differed wildly from the opinion of his Russian counterparts. Villemain claimed that – in opposition to the honest intentions of the French – the tsars would rather pursue "invasion (*l'envahissement*)" than "liberation (*délivrance*)."[54]

To underpin his criticism of Russian imperialism, Villemain cited a Greek poem that had originally been translated by the British agent William Leake in 1815. Again, the Sorbonne professor ostensibly gave the voice to an indigenous Greek and secretly tinkered with the content of his words. While the dialogue of Villemain's fictionalized Lascaris in the novel was freely invented, the text of the anonymous contemporary poet was changed in its message. The poem describes an allegorical female figure who represents Greece. She accuses all three major powers – the British, French, and Russians – of instrumentalizing a Greek will for freedom to broaden their own imperial influence. According to the anonymous poet, these empires would profess their support for the subjugated nation only if it suited their economic goals. The poet lamented that they reneged their promises once the Sublime Porte offered a better deal.[55]

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51 Anna Vlachopoulou, "A Local Uprising in an Ottoman Province? Mora/Morea, March 1821," in *New Perspectives on the Greek War of Independence. Myths, Realities, Legacies and Reflections*, ed. Yianni Cartledge and Andrekos Varnava (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 100-105.

52 Lucien Frary, "Russian Historiography and the Greek Revolution. Trends and Interpretations (1821-2021)," in *New Perspectives on the Greek War of Independence. Myths, Realities, Legacies and Reflections*, ed. Yianni Cartledge and Andrekos Varnava (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 271-96.

53 Villemain, *Lascaris*, 199-200.

54 Op. cit., 281.

55 William Martin Leake, *Researches in Greece* (London: J. Booth, 1814), 140-54.

In Villemain's version, however, this general anti-imperial accusation became increasingly one-sided. Here, the imagined woman who symbolizes Greece deplores: "Russia declared three wars and called upon my children. In writing, she assured to save them; instead, she made most of them die in her cause and left the rest worse than before. France would also declare my liberty and approach my frontiers, but Russia and England came to take it away, one because it was paid, and the other because it wanted to save the Turks and sacrifice me."[56] For evident reasons, Villemain omitted the following verses from the original: "France too began, to proclaim liberty, arrived at my confines, and increased my sufferings; censured tyranny, but thirsted for money."[57] The French professor tailored both medieval history and current Greek literature according to his imperial designs. In his version, Hellenic France appears as the savior of Greece, while Russia epitomizes Byzantine decay.

Villemain sought to turn Russia's Byzantinist self-understanding on its head. He did not deny that the tsars and the nineteenth-century Greeks shared a special connection through Orthodoxy and a common Eastern Roman heritage. However, he depicted this relationship not as a fecund alliance but as a nefarious influence that the Russians held over their southern coreligionists. In the Philhellene's eyes, the Muscovite rulers repeated the errors of the Byzantines. His imagined tsars stood for corruption, despotism, superstition, and luxury. The negative description of Byzantine society so expansively elaborated upon throughout the novel was, indeed, meant to decry Russia's current presence in the Aegean. Although it was the late Roman Empire that Villemain criticized in his fiction, the following political commentary showed the true target of his diatribe. Russia represented for Villemain a reification of the civilizational backwardness that he ascribed to the late Romans throughout his bestseller *Lascaris*. For the historical novelist, negative Byzantinism only fulfilled a purpose if directed against a political entity still present in the nineteenth century. This target is to be found in the Russian Empire and the Orthodox Church, both of which claimed a cultural allegiance to the Byzantines.

Conclusion

The 1825 novel *Lascaris* constituted a political speech act in the transimperial discourse concerning the destiny of the Eastern Mediterranean.

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56 Villemain, *Lascaris*, 371.
57 Leake, *Researches in Greece*, 154.

By interpreting the medieval history of the Byzantine Empire as positive or negative, Romantic novelists and historians indirectly claimed its former territories in the name of current empires. In the French case, negative Byzantinism served to discredit the Greeks and present them as immature Mediterranean people in need of tutelage.[58] The idea of Greek barbarity ought to justify a French interference that would restore true Hellenic identity. Moreover, the author declared Orthodox Russia a false cultural hegemon among the Eastern Christians by comparing it to the Byzantine Empire. According to Villemain, the Greeks should forswear inherent Russian affiliations and accept French rule instead. He defended an imperial doctrine through a cultural program based on historical narratives. To answer the nineteenth-century Eastern Question – the riddle of who should possess the Eastern Mediterranean – one would need to study the literature of the past, preferably the works of Hellenes and not Byzantines.

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58 Gallant, *Experiencing Dominion*, 15-55.

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