



Summary :

The Palaiologoi were the last Byzantine imperial dynasty and exercised power for almost two centuries (1259-1453). Nine emperors of the last period of the Byzantine Empire, from the recapture of Constantinople until the fall to the Ottomans (1261-1453), were members of the Palaiologian dynasty who tried in many ways to preserve the state under difficult circumstances, by giving an utmost importance on diplomacy (intermarriages, pro-union ecclesiastical policy). After the collapse of Byzantium (1453) and the fall of the Despotate of Morea on the hands of the Ottomans (1460) some members of the dynasty escaped in Italy while Zoe-Sophia Palaiologina, daughter of the despotes of Morea Thomas Palaiologos, became wife of the great prince of Moscow Ivan III. Enormous was the contribution of the Palaiologoi to the cultural flourishing of the Empire during the last decades of the 13th and the 14th century, known as "Palaiologian Renaissance".

Other Names

(for a period of time) use of the epithets Doukas, Komnenos and Angelos

Main Role

dynasty

1. General remarks

The Palaiologoi was the last Byzantine dynasty, which preserved its position on the throne of [Constantinople](#) for more than all the other dynasties (1259-1453), some years more than the long-lived [Macedonian dynasty](#) (867-1056). It is about nine emperors from the Palaiologian dynasty: [Michael VIII](#) (1261-1282), [Andronikos II](#) (1282-1328), Andronikos III (1328-1341), John V (1341-1376 and 1379-1391), Andronikos IV (1376-1391), John VII (1390), Manuel II (1391-1425), John VIII (1425-1448) and [Constantine XI Palaiologos – Dragases](#) (1448-1453). [Michael IX](#) was for many years co-emperor (1295-1320), he died, though, before his father, Andronikos II.

2. Origin - emergence

The oral tradition attributed the origin of the Palaiologoi imperial house to Italy. According to a certain version, the Palaiologoi derived their origin from the Italian city Viterbo (palaios logos = vetus verbus); according to another version, they were of Roman origin and reached Constantinople along with [Constantine the Great](#). This second version reminds parallel traditions related to other Byzantine aristocratic families aiming to the imperial throne (e.g. [Phokas](#) and [Doukai](#) families): the origin from Rome and the moving to [Constantinople](#) along with its founder and emperor Constantine the Great, reassured prestige and in some way legitimized the imperial claims of those families.¹

In reality it seems that the Palaiologoi came from [Asia Minor](#), particularly from the Byzantine [theme of Anatolikon](#).² In relation to the etymology of their epithet Kazhdan believes that it meant "ragman", something that eventually points out a humble origin, while Vannier prefers to interpret it as "collector of ancient objects".³ In reference to the other Byzantine aristocratic families, the Palaiologoi appeared relatively late, during the second half of the 11th century. Thus, the first known Palaiologos –maybe the primogenitor of the family– was Nikephoros, commander of the theme of Mesopotamia probably under the title of *doux* during the reign of Michael VII (1071-1078) and actively supported the revolt of [Nikephoros \(III\) Botaneiates](#). On the contrary, Nikephoros' son George was a supporter of the Doukai and later of [Alexios I Komnenos](#); his marriage with the grand-daughter of John Doukas, Anna, connected the Palaiologoi with the Doukas family and accordingly regulated their alliances as well. George is reported as *kouropalates* and *doux* of Dyrrachium under Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118).⁴

During the 12th century the Palaiologoi seemed to belong in the military aristocracy, whereas they were not occupying political offices. They appeared as donors in monasteries and continued the tactics of intermarriages with members of the Komnenian imperial dynasty. These family ties with the family of Doukai and the Komnenoi⁵ pointed out the first emperors of the Palaiologian dynasty, by



signing with these epithets as well, partially in order to claim their origin from an imperial dynasty and accordingly the legitimacy of their own dynasty; later this tactic was abandoned. The Palaiologian family followed [Theodore I Laskaris](#) to [Nicaea](#), in whose state they continued to occupy high-ranking offices (the father of the later emperor Michael VIII, Andronikos Palaiologos, received the title of *megas domestikos*, probably under [John III Vatatzes](#), while Michael as well made his career as a military man and until 1254 he had already occupied the office of *megas konostaulos*).

3. Establishment of an imperial dynasty

Founder of the imperial dynasty was Michael (VIII) Palaiologos, who had a leading role in the reaction of the aristocratic families against the efforts of [Theodore II Laskaris](#) for confinement of the power of the Constantinopolitan aristocracy over the Empire of Nicaea. This role distinguished him as regent of the underage emperor [John IV Laskaris](#) after the murder of the [Mouzalon brothers](#), who had been appointed as regents by Theodore II Laskaris before his death, to the general dissatisfaction of the aristocratic circles. From the throne of Nicaea (1259) he tried and succeeded the [recapture of Constantinople](#) (1261) and the restoration of the Byzantine Empire. After the recapture of Constantinople he took care in order to be crowned emperor in [Hagia Sophia](#), while the legitimate emperor and last representative of the Laskaris dynasty John IV Laskaris, was systematically pushed aside and finally got blinded with Michael's authorization, so as to consolidate the Palaiologian dynasty on the throne.

The blinding of the still underage John IV as well as the policy of the union of the Churches that Michael VIII followed led to a rupture with the patriarch [Arsenios Autoreianos](#), who excommunicated the emperor. Michael managed to remove Arsenios from the patriarchal throne (1265), while on February 1267 a ceremony was organized during which Michael VIII was absolved from sins by the patriarch Joseph I.⁶ The quarrel, however, with the party of the *Arsenitai* continued.⁷ In 1284 the son of Michael VIII, Andronikos II Palaiologos visited the blinded John IV during his travel in Asia Minor, in an effort to show in practice his disapproval for his father's choices, an attitude that characterized on the whole his policy, especially on the matter of the union of the Churches.

The Palaiologoi were the first Byzantine dynasty that adopted a coat of arms according to the western standards. Since the beginnings of the 14th century the eagle, some times single-headed some times double-headed, until then being used either as a decorative element on the imperial garments (under the Komnenoi, but not as an emblem) or as a symbol of the Empire (of the [Latin Empire of Constantinople](#)) became the coat of arms of the Palaiologoi; during the 15th century the double-headed eagle was stabilized as the emblem of the dynasty.⁸

4. Foreign policy

The emperors of the Palaiologian dynasty governed in periods when Byzantium disposed the least of its former power. Michael VIII followed a daring foreign policy, by turning the enemies of the empire the one against the other in order to buy some time and to establish the Byzantine dominion at Constantinople, as well as to gain territories for the empire in the Balkans avoiding any important resistance. Part of his policy that inaugurated a fixed tactic of the Palaiologian dynasty thereafter, was to negotiate with the Pope the union of the Churches, counting on the papal influence to prevent the offensive plans of the western leaders and mainly of Charles I of Anjou of Sicily against the restored empire. In this way Byzantium was in his days a regulating factor in a way, in the years of his successors, however, the economic and political decline became more and more apparent.⁹ The difference between the glorious past and the hard every day life of the Empire, which was now a reduced, divided and anachronistic state, unable to proceed into an internal revival, was immense. Byzantium became more an object rather than a regulator of the international changes in the Balkans and in the Mediterranean.

For that reason, the Palaiologoi were desperately asking for help from the West bearing in mind all the external dangers (Latins, Serbs, Bulgarians, Ottomans), mainly by trying to achieve the ecclesiastical union in an exchange for the papal protection: Michael VIII (1274, Council of Lyon) and John VIII (1439, Council of Ferrara - Florence) signed the union, while John V was the first Byzantine emperor who in 1369 espoused the Roman-catholic creed. Nevertheless, some of the emperors of this dynasty, first of all Andronikos II, were intensely opposed to the union. Besides this, the diplomacy of the Palaiologoi was trying, through the creation of family ties (intermarriages) with the Latins, as well as with Serbia, [Bulgaria](#), [Trebizond](#) and Epirus, to ameliorate the international



position of Byzantium.

The results of this policy were of limited range, because the empire was on the route of the no-turning-back decline. While civil wars weakened the Byzantine state, the external enemies were gaining more and more territorial profits. In 1346 the Serbian ruler Stephan Dušan, after having subjugated Macedonia except Thessalonica, was crowned emperor in Skopje by the Serbian patriarch; until 1348 he had subjugated Epirus and Thessaly as well. But the collapse of the Serbian empire after Dušan's death did not bring any real relief on Byzantium, because the lack of a strong power in the Balkans left even bigger margins on the Ottoman Turks. John V Palaiologos (1341-1376 and 1379-1391) tried to confront this unfavorable situation by turning to the Pope for help, without any result. Just a short of time after November 1371 and the battle of Evros, where the Ottomans clashed victoriously with Serbian princes, while no Byzantine forces took part, the Empire passed almost without a fight under the Ottomans' sovereignty, obliged to pay a tribute and offer military service.¹⁰

On the sea, the weakened Byzantine Empire was isolated between Genoa and Venice, to which it had granted enormous privileges seeking to achieve their alliance. In addition, in the civil conflicts that brought on the throne the son of John V, Andronikos IV Palaiologos (1376-1379), the [Genoese](#) and the [Venetians](#) were actively interfered, arguing for the granting of proper commercial locations on them, and mainly of Tenedos, which Andronikos IV granted to the Genoese after the capture of the throne, while John V had promised it to the Venetians. But while the Ottomans were all the more consolidating their dominion in the Balkans, the sultan became the real regulator of the situation on the throne of Constantinople, while the influence of the maritime powers was being reduced. In the 15th century, the last emperors of Byzantium had lost any real power, while the appeals for help against the Ottomans that they constantly addressed to the western states and the Pope had no substantial result, because their power for negotiations had been totally dispersed. When the last Byzantine emperor, Constantine XI (1449-1453), declared the union of the Churches in Hagia Sophia on December 1452, had to confront a strong resistance from the Anti-unionists, whereas the essential benefit that he derived in help from the Pope was meager and incapable of postponing any further the imminent [fall of Constantinople](#).

5. Internal policy

The empire during the days of the Palaiologoi was a state unable to remain united. Under Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282-1328) [Eirene-Yolanda of Montferrat](#), Andronikos' wife, put for the first time the question of a possible division of the imperial territories among the sons of the emperor. Although emperor's refusal, it shows that there was still the model of the union of the empire.¹¹ However, this model was undermined by the objective circumstances. The aristocracy, for which the ascension of the Palaiologoi to the throne of Constantinople constituted an important victory, gathered more and more land estates, which were exempted from taxation, while their relation to the central authority became all the more autonomous; the result was a growing financial crisis and the collapse of the centralized administrative system. Furthermore, the cutting into pieces of the land favored the cutting into pieces of the power. The emperors were granting imperial lands to the members of their family in order to organize their protection and to succeed in preserving them as part of the empire.¹²

The Palaiologian period was marked as well by disputes and conflicts among the members of the family that led to civil wars and accelerated the fall of Byzantium. In 1320 Andronikos II Palaiologos tried to exclude his grandson Andronikos III from the right of succession, in spite of the death of the latter's father and co-emperor, Michael IX, on October 1320. Andronikos III, however, by gathering around him a dynamic opposition party from part of the aristocracy, he revolted and tried to secure his imperial rights by force. A period of civil wars commenced for Byzantium that was not ended until the May of 1328, with the final capture of the power by Andronikos III. However, the civil war had inflicted damages upon the economy of the empire, had already led once to the division of the territories (in 1321 Andronikos III, having been recognized as co-emperor, took Thrace and some of the regions in Macedonia and left Constantinople and the rest of the Byzantine territories to Andronikos II, as well as the right of negotiations with foreign powers, in order to have an at least apparent unity); it had also allowed the Bulgarian and Serbian states to appear as regulating factors in the dynastic disputes of the empire, because Andronikos III had turned for help to the former ones, while Andronikos II to the latter ones.

Andronikos III died in 1341, leaving his underage son John V on the throne. For the regency came to a quarrel on the one side



megas domestikos John (VI) Kantakouzenos, a friend and ally of Andronikos III since the era of the civil wars, and on the other side John's mother, Anna of Savoia and the patriarch John Kalekas. The encounter led to a new civil war (1341-1347), from which Kantakouzenos stepped out victorious and powerful. The civil war took as well the shape of an ecclesiastical dispute, because the patriarch was a fanatic anti-Hesychast, while Kanatkouzenos had been supported by the Hesychasts.

John VI Kantakouzenos, now the regent of young John V Palaiologos, tried to consolidate his own dynasty on the throne. He married John V with his daughter Helen and later crowned as co-emperor his elder son Matthew. In this way he clearly showed his intentions. The maintenance of the Palaiologan dynasty on the throne was judged by another civil war (1352-1354). After the victory of John V Palaiologos, John Kantakouzenos resigned from the throne and became a monk, while a little later (1357) Matthew Kantakouzenos was forced to resign from his imperial ambitions. Furthermore, the Palaiologoi repelled the Kantakouzenoi in the Peloponnese, where in 1382, after the reign of Manuel and Matthew Kantakouzenos, Theodore I Palaiologos, brother of the emperor John V, was crowned. It was about an important success of the Palaiologoi against their rivals, because the Peloponnese during the second half of the 14th and the first half of the 15th century became the most powerful Byzantine province. The Palaiologoi of the Peloponnese stayed loyal to Constantinople, but in reality they were governing independently.

During the eight decade of the 14th century, a new serious rupture inside the imperial environment led to civil encounters. Because in 1373 the young and impatient Andronikos IV rose unsuccessfully against his own father, John V imprisoned him and disinherited him. His successor was appointed Manuel II, who was crowned co-emperor as well. However, Andronikos IV managed to escape from his prison and with the help of the Genoese to ascend to the throne and in 1376 to imprison his father and his younger brother. In 1379 John V regained the throne, but the doubts remained about the succession. The agreement that was closed on May 1381 foresaw Andronikos IV as successor, and afterwards his son John VII, while Manuel II had been passed over.¹³ Nevertheless, after the death of Andronikos IV (1385), and the brief usurpation of John VII (1390), Manuel II finally managed to establish his father on the throne and later to succeed him after his death (1391). There were other differences as well between Manuel II and John VII, but these were ended after the death of the latter one (1408). The clash continued among the younger brothers of Manuel II as well (Constantine, Thomas and Demetrios), while he was succeeded on the throne by his son, John VIII; after the death of the latter one the power was taken by Constantine XI, who was about to be the last Byzantine emperor.

Despite the financial and political decline, and despite the civil wars, the period of the Palaiologian dynasty was an era of cultural flourishing of the empire, into which it is believed that the emperors contributed at a degree. With the last decade of the 13th century as a start a flourishing on the artistic, as well as on the intellectual and scientific field is observed, which became known under the name "[Palaiologan Renaissance](#)"; cultural flourishing was observed on Morea as well during the 15th century ("the last Byzantine renaissance"). Among the Palaiologoi Andronikos II showed a particular favor towards science and scientists, whereas the most important scholar was Manuel II.

6. Survival of the family after the Fall

After the collapse of Byzantium (1453) and the fall of Morea on the hands of the Ottomans (1460) some members of the dynasty took refuge in Italy.¹⁴ However, the marriage of Zoe-Sophia Palaiologina, daughter of despotes Thomas, with the great prince of Moscow Ivan III (1462-1505) was of great importance. Thus the Russian prince tried to promote Moscow as the "Third Rome" and heir of the Empire. On the other hand, the legend on the last emperor of Byzantium never ceased to attract the interest until our days.¹⁵

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Glossary :

arsenitai

Followers and supporters of patriarch Arsenios Autoreianos, who had excommunicated Michael VIII Palaiologos. Michael managed to get rid of Arsenios in 1265; from that time, Arsenios' followers were at odds with the Patriarchate of Constantinople, refusing to recognize Arsenios' successors to the patriarchal throne. Politically they supported the Lascarid dynasty and opposed the dynasty of the Palaiologoi. The dispute was resolved in 1310.

doukas (lat. dux)

Antiquity: Roman military commander who, in some provinces, combined military and civil functions.

Buzantium: a higher military officer. From the second half of the 10th c. the title indicates the military commander of a larger district. After the 12th c., doukes were called the governors of small themes.

konostaulos

1) High-ranking official (third in the military hierarchy after the protomastoras and megas stratopedarches).

2) Commander of fleet, admiral (from the Venetian contestabile).

3) Megas konostaulos indicates as high military official from the 13th century, head of the Latin mercenaries.



kouropalates

A high-ranking dignity, which from Justinian I was conferred on members of the imperial family and on foreign princes. During the 11th c. it was conferred on several generals, not belonging to the imperial family.

megas domestikos

Supreme military commander of the imperial army. High-ranking title which was generally given to close relatives of the emperor.

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Chronological Table

Second half of the 11th century: The first known Palaiologos (progenitor of the family?) Nikephoros

12th century: The Palaiologoi undertake high-ranking military offices.

After 1204: Illustrious aristocratic family of the Empire of Nicaea

1258: Rise of Michael Palaiologos

1259: Michael Palaiologos proclaimed emperor

1261: Restoration of the Byzantine Empire

1274: Council of Lyon for the union of the Churches



- 1321-1238: Civil war between Andronikos II and Andronikos III
- 1341-1347: Victory of John VI Kantakouzenos in the civil war
- 1352-1354: Victory of John V Palaiologos over John VI Kantakouzenos
- 1357: Matthew Kantakouzenos resigns from the throne of Constantinople
- After 1371: Byzantium as vassal state to the Ottoman Empire
- 1373-1379: Conflict between John V and Andronikos IV
- 1381: Family agreement for the succession on the throne
- 1382: The Palaiologoi resume power in the Peloponnese from the Kantakouzenoi
- 1402: Battle of Ancyra and release from the state of vassalage
- 1424: Byzantium becomes obliged again to pay tribute to the Turks
- 1439: Council of Ferrara-Florence for the union of the Churches
- 1453: Fall of Constantinople
- 1460: The Ottomans occupy the Byzantine territories of Morea

Auxiliary Catalogs

List of emperors of the Palaiologian dynasty

- Michael VIII Palaiologos (1261-1282 / 1259-1261: Empire of Nicaea)
- Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282-1328)
- (Michael IX Palaiologos: co-emperor 1294-1320)
- Andronikos III Palaiologos (1328-1341)
- John V Palaiologos (1341-1376 and 1379-1391 / 1347-1354: John VI Kantakouzenos)
- Andronikos IV Palaiologos (1376-1379)
- John VII Palaiologos (1390)
- Manuel II Palaiologos (1391-1425)
- John VIII Palaiologos (1425-1448)
- Constantine XI Palaiologos (1449-1453)