

*The Fall of the Byzantine Empire: A Chronicle by George Sphrantzes 1401-1477.* Translated by Marios Philippides. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980, pp. 174.

This is the first English translation of Sphrantzes' *Chronicon Minus* in its entirety. The book also includes the much longer version of the Fall (Book III, 3-13), the *Chronicon Maius*, which was written in the sixteenth century by Kakarios Melissenos (Melissourgos).

The translator Marios Philippides, assistant professor of Classics at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, has not only translated the text ably, but he has also clarified many difficult passages with critical notes and general introduction. Biographical sketches of the most important figures in the works of Sphrantzes and Makarios are appended as well, as a bibliography of the primary sources of the Fall, and of modern works on Sphrantzes and two indexes of places and persons.

The special significance of this work lies in the fact that George Sphrantzes worked intimately with the last three Byzantine emperors (Manuel II Palaeologus, John VIII Palaeologus, and Constantine XI Dragazes Palaeologus), and his account is therefore one of an eyewitness and personal participant in the events, which he narrates, as an ambassador on many important diplomatic missions, as intended grand chancellor of the very last Byzantine emperor, Constantine XI, and as a powerful political factor in the Peloponnese and in Constantinople itself.

Consequently, Sphrantzes' account is of the utmost importance for illuminating the history of the last fifty years of the Byzantine-Greek Empire. The narrative shows how the thousand-year-old Empire functioned on the eve of its Fall: its court proceedings, diplomacy, foreign policy, church divisions, domestic troubles, its follies and hopes, and its eventual disintegration.

What makes Sphrantzes' history especially lively is its autobiographical quality, honesty and personal tragedy. Most historians of his times were not as active participants in the events they described as Sphrantzes. Sphrantzes' life, it is not an exaggeration to say, is a mirror of the court life of Constantinople. And rightly Philippides writes that "his (Sphrantzes') career is typical of the uncertainty of his age: he was a courtier, a diplomat, an ambassador, a soldier, a governor, a slave, and, in his last years, a monk and a penniless author" (p. 13). Furthermore, because this work involves the history of not only Byzantium, but also of Italy, Ottoman Turkey, and the Balkans, it does appeal to a wide spectrum of historical and cultural interests.

It is a happy omen that in the last five years, certain Greek - American professors started a movement to make Byzantine and post-Byzantine authors available through translations, not only to specialists, but to the general reader as well (i.e. Professor H. J. Magoulias', of the Wayne State University, translation of Doukas, 1975; Professor C. Cavarnos', of Hellenic College, *Modern Orthodox Saints*, 1976-1979; Professor A. Athanassakis', of the University of California at Santa Barbara, *The Life of Pachomius*, 1975).