QUASI ALTERUM BYZANTIUM: THE PRESERVATION OF IDENTITY THROUGH MEMORY AND CULTURE BY ARISTOCRATIC BYZANTINE WOMEN, 1440-1600

by

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B.S., Boston University, 2003
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

2017
This dissertation analyzes the preservation of Byzantine culture, memory, and identity after 1453 by a network of aristocratic Byzantine women. By integrating art history, history, and anthropology to follow the lives, social networks, and patronage patterns of these women, this project examines the cultural contributions of this small, yet remarkable population. The first chapter discusses Anna Palaiologina Notaras, who perpetuated Byzantine culture through texts and images in Venice. By negotiating between the Byzantine émigrés and the Venetian authorities, she secured unprecedented privileges and recognition for the marginalized community. The second chapter centers on Zoe (Sophia) Palaiologina, niece of Emperor Constantine XI, who was raised as an exile at the papal court. In 1472, she married the Grand Duke of Moscow and became a vital translator among the visual languages of Byzantium, Italy, and Russia. Through
her entourage, objects, and familial connections, the princess solidified Moscow’s connection to the fallen Byzantium. Chapter three focuses on Cantakuzina (Catherine) and Mara Branković, daughters of Serbian Despot, George Branković. In 1435, Mara married Ottoman Sultan, Murad II and became stepmother to Mehmed II, conqueror of Constantinople. Throughout her life, she participated in a series of diplomatic efforts, which allowed her to become a patron of Byzantine culture within the confines of the Ottoman Empire. Mehmed II relied on Mara to validate symbolically his rule in the eyes of his Byzantine subjects, for whom she was a de-facto spokeswoman. Mara and Cantakuzina negotiated peacefully between Mehmed, the Venetians, Athonite monastics, and prominent post-Byzantine figures. Chapter four discusses Helena Palaiologina, another niece of Constantine XI, and her daughter Charlotte. In 1442, Helena married John II of Cyprus, and became Queen of Cyprus, Armenia, and Jerusalem. Helena applied her power to welcome an important group of post-1453 refugees to Cyprus. Charlotte was forced into exile and ended her life at the papal court, to which she gifted a number of valuable objects. Together, Helena and Charlotte helped preserve the Byzantine imperial traditions of philanthropy and diplomatic gift giving. This dissertation contributes to early modern women’s studies and provides a more nuanced understanding of cultural perpetuation.