CHAPTER TWO

BYZANTIUM: SOVEREIGNTY AND LEGITIMACY

For all the rulers who established themselves in the Aegean and the Balkans after 1204, the context in which they found themselves was defined by the legacy of Byzantium. The Aegean basin formed the centre around which the empire's fluctuating territorial fortunes revolved and the region's history had been essentially that of the empire for many centuries. This old order was overturned through a combination of processes of disintegration, which dissolved a paradigm of unity which the empire had managed to uphold through earlier crises. The conquest and settlement of much of the empire by outside groups, the division of its remaining territories between competing Byzantine claimants, the decay of administrative institutions, the devolution of authority to local regimes and the breakdown of a system of economic redistribution centred on Constantinople all played their part.

However, the empire's legacy, and survival in diminished form, did continue to exert an influence across the region both within and beyond its truncated frontiers, through its influence on the identity, beliefs and outlook of the inhabitants. The extent and nature of the impact of this Byzantine background on the development of other regimes, through their relations with the people they ruled, is of general importance in determining how far views of the world shaped by the era of political unity survived its collapse, and thus how deep-seated was the fragmentation that followed. For the continuing empire in particular, whose material capacities were so sharply diminished, this influence through hearts and minds was critical in determining its ability to operate a network of power that could gain any purchase on the world around it. In the customary manner of empires, it had traditionally enlisted the services of a wide range of outsiders, and cultivated a fringe of client rulers who upheld its claims to universal sovereignty and adjusted their policies to suit its needs. Its hold upon such clients was founded on some combination of military protection or threat, financial incentives, religious persuasion and its capacity to underpin other rulers' authority through the imprimatur of its own charisma and prestige. For an empire deprived of its wealth and might, the ideological elements of this arsenal were the ones retaining
the greatest potential effectiveness. Whereas once clientage had on occasion been a prelude to absorption, as it would be on a grander scale in the expanding ambit of the Ottomans, in an empire in acute decline client regimes were more likely to be the legacy of retreat, a means of maintaining a limited grip on areas which might otherwise slip from the Byzantine sphere entirely.

TheGattilusio lordships occupy an important position in these developments, as Latin regimes in the erstwhile Byzantine world that owed their original foundation to Byzantine authority. Their integration into the Byzantine network must be understood both from the imperial point of view, in terms of the motives and wider trends which favoured the territorial concessions that created the lordships, and from that of the Gattilusio themselves, in terms of the incentives which underpinned their enduring attachment to Byzantium. Between these fundamental poles of the relationship lies the shifting pattern of alliances and estrangements between individuals which both underpinned and undermined what was at once the most formal and the most personal of the lordships’ wider affiliations. These fluctuations also reflect the influences exerted on the functioning of this relationship by the other networks of power that influenced the Gattilusio lordships. The way in which the Gattilusio regime was established and expanded by successive Byzantine emperors illustrates the final permutations of the Byzantine response to the perennial imperial challenge of turning the energies of dangerous groups to the empire’s advantage, and the extent to which its assets and methods had been transformed by its decline. Its enduring adherence to the empire reflects the advantages which could accrue to non-Byzantine rulers who managed to work with the grain of the civilisation which had shaped the indigenous society on which their regimes were superimposed.

The Place of the Lordships in Byzantine Government

As the creation of a Byzantine Emperor, the significance of the Gattilusio regime must first be assessed in terms of the purposes for which it was established. These in turn depend on the circumstances and motives underlying the original grant of Lesbos to Francesco I Gattilusio. This was one of a number of territorial concessions made by John V Palaiologos in the immediate wake of his acquisition of effective control of what remained of the empire. Another was his recognition in 1355 of Genoese rule on Chios, in return for acknowledgement of imperial