CHAPTER 7

The Territorialisation of Hellenism: Giovanni Gemisto’s Vision of the Greek World

Byzantine intellectuals tried to galvanise Western powers against the Ottoman Turks in order to liberate and regain their fatherland, which they called Greece. Even if their attachment to Greece is pivotal to their sense of Greekness, what this fatherland represented, and where it was located, was, paradoxically, anything but clear-cut. Their silence has been explained as a rhetorical strategy. As the eventual partition of Ottoman territories in the East would be a bone of contention, they wisely preferred not to anticipate such a partition as occurring in a way favourable to the Greeks.1 The general vagueness about the contours of their fatherland also resulted from genuine uncertainty as to the exact territory they wanted to restore. Did they want to return to the Byzantine empire as they, or their parents, had left it? Or did they want to establish a new kind of Greek kingdom? And how could they legitimise their claims to a specific territory when all these lands were in the hands of different powers—and often had been so from the Fourth Crusade onwards?

An answer came in the winter of 1516, when the Anconitan presses of Bernardino Guerralda issued a curious Latin poem of more than two thousand dactylic hexameters, entitled Protrepticon et pronosticon and composed by the otherwise unknown Giovanni Gemisto, who probably fled from Epidauros to Italy in the 1460s.2 It has been suggested that he was the grandson of Gemistos Plethon, whose sons, Demetrios and Andronikos, held estates not too far from Epidauros.3 In Italy, Gemisto became a member of the humanist

---

2 Gemisto’s biography is obscure (see Lamers 2012b: 68, n. 16). He refers to “Epidaurus” as his birth-place. In early modern Latin, this name may refer to Epidauros in Argolis, Monemvasia (near the ancient site of Epidaurus Limera), or Ragusa (modern Dubrovnik). From the fact that the poet calls his birth-place a “tamer of horses” (Gemisto 1516: fol. Eiv, l. 11), alluding, in Vergilian fashion (G. 3.42.), to the horse-races in honour of Asclepius at Epidauros, it can be inferred that he was born in Epidauros. Additionally, he calls Asclepius’ sons Podalirius and Machaon his “kinsmen” from Epidaurus (fol. Ci, ll. 29–30). See also Appendix 2 on p. 295 (no. 18).
3 This has been suggested by Sathas (1863: 228), Legrand (1903: 225–26), Masai (1956: 53), Geanakopoulos (1976: 191), and Woodhouse (1986: 30). For Plethon’s sons, see PLP nos. 3629 and 3632. On the estates of the Gemistoi in the Peloponnesus see, most recently, Stefec (2012b).
circles surrounding Silvio Piccolomini (not to be confused with Enea Silvio) in Montemarciano and was working as a secretary in the maritime republic of Ancona by the time he published his address to Pope Leo X. As "secretarius of Ancona", he might have been involved in the construction of galleys that Pope Leo X had ordered there for service against the Turks. In any case, Gemisto’s poem exhorts the pope to undertake a crusade against the infidels in general and the Ottoman Turks in particular. In seven chapters, the poet prophesied the outcome of such a crusade in detail, climaxing with the pope’s triumphal return to Rome and his eventual apotheosis. A substantial part of his vision concerns the liberation of Graecia, and Gemisto creates an evocative image of his native country.

As the establishment of an independent Greece was generally not a major aim of the powers involved in planning a crusade, Gemisto’s poem reads as a bold attempt to position the liberation of Greece—not just Constantinople—as one of the main goals of the crusading enterprise. As such, his poem contains what seems to be the first politico-territorial representation of Greece, predating the first regional map of Greece—produced by Nikolaos Sophianos in 1540—by more than twenty years. This chapter shows how Gemisto constructed his geopoetical image of Greece. Since Greece did not exist as a well-defined area nor as a unitary territory in the Renaissance, Gemisto’s representation of his fatherland relates to reality in more complex ways. The theoretical problem of imagining Greece before Greece will be illustrated by outlining how the ancient sources, humanists, and cartographers imagined Greece. We need this background to understand the extent of Gemisto’s innovation in the Protrepticon et pronosticon. After I have placed Gemisto’s poem in the context of crusade appeals addressed to Pope Leo X, I will reconstruct the textual basis of his image of Greece in order to show exactly how the poet constructed his fatherland (and to demonstrate its ‘constructedness’ in the first place). Taking into account various factors influencing Gemisto’s construction (mainly the historical relevance of certain areas, the logic of crusade rhetoric,

---

Thierry Ganchou informs me that he has never found Gemisto’s name during his extensive archival prosopographical research in Italian archives (personal correspondence, 15 September 2014).
