Land and Landowners in the Greek Territories under Latin Dominion, 13th–14th Centuries

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The Arrival of the Latins and the New Status Quo

Land and its administration is an important chapter of medieval history. Throughout the long period of the Middle Ages, land was not just a source of wealth, but also, a means of social enforcement, a source of power and a point of access to political authority. In return for the exploitation of land and the collection of revenues, landowners would help conquer new territories and support the regime (either by offering personal military service or by funding the army) whilst simultaneously assisting in the administration and the dispensation of justice. Consequently the authorities of each state (or the dominant power in the case of colonies or subjugated states), though they often reserved the direct ownership (dominium directum) of the land, depended on the support of the landowners. Therefore, the regulation of land-tenure and the formulation of a landownership regime were prerequisites for the organisation of any hegemony or colony. Otherwise, sovereignty would remain tenuous.

The question that Venetians and Franks had to deal with, when they began to conquer segments of the Byzantine Empire following the Fourth Crusade, was twofold: on the one hand, who would own the land in each new hegemony and how would the new owners administer it, and on the other, what was to be done with lands formerly belonging to the lay and ecclesiastical authorities. As far as the first question is concerned, in all the Latin states, land remained under the control of centralised authority, which in turn selected who to grant its use to. As far as the second question is concerned, the issue of the lands belonging to the local Orthodox Churches (bishoprics and archbishoprics) seems to have been easier to resolve than that of lay land, at least in theory, since in most cases the high ranking Greek clergy was replaced by Latin ecclesiastics. According to the agreement between Venetians and crusaders (Pactum Comune), the property of the Greek Church was to be confiscated; part of it would then be granted to the Latin churches to ensure their viability,
while the rest would devolve to the Venetian and Frankish overlords.\footnote{“Clerici vero utriusque partis illas ecclesias ordinare debent, que sue parti contigerint. De possessionibus vero ecclesiarum tot et tantum clericis et ecclesiis debent provideri, quod honorifice possint vivere et sustentari. Relique vero possessiones ecclesiarum dividi et partiri debent secundum ordinem presignatum.” See Walter Prevenier, De Oorkonden der graven van Vlaanderen (101–1206), 3 vols. (Brussels, 1964), 2: no. 267.} The fate of monastic property was similar, though here the status formerly enjoyed by the monasteries was crucial in deciding who would now control them: imperial monasteries came under the control of the state, patriarchal ones came under the control of the Latin Patriarch of Constantinople and the monasteries belonging to the jurisdiction of local archbishops or bishops passed into the jurisdiction of the newly created Latin archbishopric and bishoprics. The daughter-houses (metochia) of the two important monasteries of St Catherine of Sinai and St John of Patmos were treated as exceptions and retained their former status, following special agreements with the new lords.

Contrary to what was the case with ecclesiastical and monastic property, Byzantine landowners (archons or archontes)\footnote{The Greek term archons or archontes, found in Latin documents, has been adopted by modern scholars to describe the byzantine landowners in general (but sometimes only the upper tier of them), as well as high Byzantine officials in the territories conquered by the Latins.} had a decisive role to play in the crystallisation of the new land regime, as they formed a powerful political, social and economic force that the new conquerors could not ignore. All of the conquerors were faced with the following dilemma: either to confiscate and redistribute the land, excluding the old owners, or to recognise ownership as it stood until the time of the conquest. Despite some initial proposals to marginalise and neutralise the Byzantine landowners, the new Latin lords were able, occasionally under duress, to incorporate the old Byzantine landowners into the new landowning system of each state, and thus ensure their support for the new regime. The manner of incorporation as well as the landowning system varied in its details in each area, as in fact did the conquerors and the manner of conquest.

Broadly speaking, all conquered territories of the Byzantine Empire witnessed a compromise between Latins and Byzantine landowners, though the terms of the compromise and the methods by which it was achieved varied. One of the areas where change is observable relates to the political power that derived from landownership and this in fact is what distinguished Greek from Latin landowners. Once the political and social situation had been stabilised, the landowning class in the Frankish territories remained relatively closed and comprised a small number of people who supported the ruler and participated in the administration. In the Venetian colonies, by contrast, and especially in