

# **Beyond the Image of Submission** At the Origin of the Distorted Portrait of the Byzantine Emperor John V Palaiologos (r. 1354-91) in the Latin West

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**Abstract** This article explores the origin of the distorted image of the Byzantine emperor John V Palaiologos (r. 1354-91) in the Latin West. It opens with an examination of a submissive iconographic representation of John V in a seventeenth/eighteenth-century Venetian painting. The second section reflects on the initial stages of negative deformation that this emperor's portrait underwent in historiography. The rationale behind these distortions seems to be closely linked to John V's adherence to, then rejection of the Latin faith: in 1369, he converted to Latin Christianity, but over time his conversion came to be no longer considered valid.

**Keywords** John V Palaiologos. Byzantine Empire. Religious submission. Latin faith. Distorted portrait. Historiographical bias.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Beyond Da Canal's Painting: At the Origin of an Iconographic Distorted Portrait. – 3 The Literary Portraits of John V in the Work of Philippe de Mézières: At the Origin of a Historiographical Distortion. – 4 Conclusions.

## **1 Introduction**

The Venetian church of Santa Maria del Carmelo, known as the 'Carmini', houses a canvas painting entitled *Un imperatore innanzi a un vescovo*, 'An emperor before a bishop'. This painting, which cannot be dated precisely, is the work of the Venetian painter and scholar

Vincenzo da Canal (seventeenth/eighteenth century). It depicts the Byzantine emperor John V Palaiologos (r. 1354-91) prostrating himself before the Latin bishop Peter Thomas; they are surrounded by many bearded men [fig. 1].<sup>1</sup> By representing John V in the act of publicly submitting to a Western figure, da Canal's painting conveys the image of a submissive ruler.

The aim of this article is to reconstruct the 'origin' of John V's submissive portrait: the reasons for its iconographic representation in da Canal's painting. It will then investigate the related phenomenon of the development of a distorted literary representation of this emperor in the West. After reviewing a few contextual elements of John V's reign, it considers the story told by Philippe de Mézières in *The Life of Saint Peter Thomas* (1366) about the encounter between the emperor and the bishop, highlighting the historiographical biases that may have influenced da Canal's depiction of the former. The last section advances some reflections on the initial stages of the emergence of John V's distorted portrayal in the West.

## 2 Beyond Da Canal's Painting: At the Origin of an Iconographic Distorted Portrait

### 2.1 The 'Conversion' of John V According to *The Life of Saint Peter Thomas* by Philippe de Mézières

When John V Palaiologos ascended to the Byzantine throne in 1354 - he would rule until 1391 - the empire was in the midst of a complex crisis that had been shaking its foundations since the early fourteenth century. Religious conflicts and civil wars had torn apart the social fabric of the empire whilst Byzantine territorial domination had given way to the Turks in Asia Minor and to the Serbs and Bulgarians in the Balkans. These challenges continued throughout the second half of the fourteenth century, further weakening and impoverishing the Byzantine state. However, as soon as he came to power, John V took a number of measures to readapt the Byzantine state to this context of crisis.<sup>2</sup>

These measures included the policy of dialogue and rapprochement with Western powers that John V pursued until at least the early

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<sup>1</sup> In the Beni Culturali general catalogue: NCTN 00152509. Information about this painting remains scarce in the archives of the Patriarchate of Venice as well as in twentieth-century restoration notes (see for example Fiocco 1942, 163-4). As for its creator, Vincenzo da Canal, his career as an artist remains largely unexplored. He is mainly known as the biographer of his contemporary, the better-known Venetian artist Gregorio Lazzarini. See below.

<sup>2</sup> The most important works on John V and his reign are Halecki 1930, Radić 1993 and Estangüi Gómez 2014.



**Figure 1** Vincenzo da Canal, *Un imperatore innanzi a un vescovo*.  
Church of Santa Maria del Carmelo (Carmini), Venice.  
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1370s. Several times, John V turned to Latin-faith lordships, hoping to obtain financial or military help to curb the advances of the Turks. As a result, he became the first Byzantine emperor to travel outside of imperial territory for diplomatic reasons. In 1365-66, he went to Hungary looking for the support of King Louis of Anjou (Gill 1979; Nerantzi-Varmazi 1989). Similarly, in 1370-71, he sojourned in Venice, where he pursued some intricate negotiations concerning a financial loan that he hoped to obtain from the Republic (Loenertz 1958; Bertelè 1962). Shortly before, in 1369, he had visited Pope Urban V in Rome where he had converted to the Latin faith (Halecki 1930). However, despite these efforts, John V did not receive the assistance he sought, at least in the short term.

It is precisely in this climate of dialogue and rapprochement with the Latin Church and the West, that the story of the meeting between John V and Peter Thomas – the two characters in da Canal's painting – occurs. This story is reported only in *The Life of Saint Peter Thomas* (henceforth, this work will be referred as the *Life*), a hagiographic text written around 1366 by the French scholar Philippe de Mézières (1327-1405) with the aim of securing the bishop's canonisation.<sup>3</sup>

**3** Philippe de Mézières, who knew Peter Thomas personally and accompanied him on his last missions (though not to Constantinople), wrote the *Life* shortly after the latter's

Peter Thomas (ca 1305-66) was a Carmelite friar, which likely explains the presence of the painting in the Carmini church. His ecclesiastical career as a bishop and archbishop culminated in his appointment as the Latin patriarch of Constantinople in 1364. He is also known to have played an important role as apostolic nuncio during the pontificate of Innocent VI. Among his undertakings, at the beginning of the 1360s, he was a legate in Cyprus, where he oversaw the conversion of many of the island's inhabitants, eventually provoking a reaction from the patriarch of Constantinople Kallistos I.<sup>4</sup> Shortly before, between 1356 and 1357, he had been sent to Constantinople with the mission of educating John V, an orthodox ruler, in the Latin faith.

According to Mézières' account, Peter Thomas entered the empire's territory while John V was on a military campaign (Smet 1954, 74). Having explained the purpose of his mission, the apostolic legate began to assiduously visit the emperor and, as time passed, John V and his men became more and more convinced of the bishop's religious arguments. Once back in Constantinople, Peter Thomas converted the emperor: John V was made "a true Catholic and subject to the Roman Church, through confessing the articles of faith one by one and through declaring that the holy Roman Church was his mother".<sup>5</sup> He is then said to have received communion from him (74-5). After describing John V's conversion, Mézières includes, as proof of his words, a copy of a letter in Latin that John V is supposed to have sent to Pope Innocent VI on the 7th of November 1357 attesting to the emperor's conversion before Peter Thomas (76-9). Mézières' account concludes by mentioning the conversion of other Christians of the empire (80).

The historicity of this conversion has been a subject of debate among historians. Firstly, no other extant sources record the act of religious submission reported in the *Life*. Secondly, and most importantly, an official document preserved in the Vatican Secret Archives confirms that John V personally converted to the Latin faith more than ten years later, on the 18th of October 1369 in Rome.<sup>6</sup> In addition to these problems, some aspects of Mézières' account invite

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death. On Peter Thomas, the main work remains that of Boehlke 1966; on Mézières, see the collection of articles dedicated to him edited by Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Petkov 2012.

<sup>4</sup> See the letter written by Kallistos I and sent to the clergy and notables of Cyprus regarding the attempts at conversion conducted by Peter Thomas on the island (late 1361-early 1362), where the legate is described as a 'ferocious beast': Darrouzès 1977, 370-2, no. 2443.

<sup>5</sup> Smet 1954, 75: *ipse imperator factus est verus Catholicus et obediens ecclesiae Romanae, articulos fidei sigillatim confitendo, et sanctam ecclesiam Romanam esse matrem suam asserendo*. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

<sup>6</sup> Vatican, ASV, A.A. Arm. I-XVIII, n. 401. Written in Greek and Latin, this document also comprises the emperor's signature and a notarial act full of details as to how and where the conversion took place. For the edition and a commentary, see Pieralli 2016.

scepticism. For instance, the imperial letter that the author integrates into his account as proof of John V's conversion is absent from the register containing papal missives for that period (Vatican, ASV, *Reg. Vat.* 62) due to a lacuna, so that it is impossible to know with certitude whether or not the letter was actually sent to the Curia. Furthermore, although many historians consider this letter reliable (since it presents all the characteristics of authenticity),<sup>7</sup> they have nevertheless interpreted its contents differently. For some, it is clear that, in his letter, the emperor abjures the schism and offers the union of the Byzantine Church with Rome in return for military aid (Smet 1954, 202-4); others, however, consider the communion that John V would have received in the Latin rite to be, if true, the only guarantee of his conversion (Halecki 1930, 62).<sup>8</sup>

Finally, to some extent, Mézières' characterisation of his protagonists seems to affect the factual content of his narrative. In a study published in 2009, Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski concludes that Mézières' *Life* is dominated by hagiographic discourse and the ideology of crusade, with Peter Thomas as the incarnation of the dual ideal of saint and crusader (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 2009, 224). The account of Peter Thomas' mission to Constantinople also features a number of motifs drawn from these discourses. The nuncio is here presented as an indefatigable traveller, who arrives in Constantinople after many pains and dangers and keeps tormenting his body with afflictions and fasting. His rhetorical skill is remarkable: his words "penetrated the heart of the emperor and softened it, as well as that of very many other Greek lords".<sup>9</sup> Above all, Peter Thomas is represented as a *confessor gloriosissimus*, a most glorious confessor. The author's attempt to construct an image of Peter Thomas as a saintly guide to the Byzantines creates what we might consider to be a 'positively' distorted portrait (cf. Blumenfeld-Kosinski 2009, 230, 237).

Kiril Petkov, in a study published in 1997, argues that Mézières' depiction of the Byzantines produces a sense of religious 'otherness' (1997, 259). This is indeed the impression given when we look at the above-mentioned account: the Byzantines "had been separated from the Church for a long time and deceived the Roman Church many times in treaties".<sup>10</sup> Pope Innocent, in sending Peter Thomas, "did not

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Halecki 1930, 62 fn. 2.

<sup>8</sup> See also the doubts expressed by Sebastian Kolditz, who considers that the deferral of the promises contained in John V's letter - such as that he would depose the patriarch and put in his place a man of the Latin faith - "do not mitigate the impression of a rather balanced, if not reluctant, response" to the pope (2022, 510).

<sup>9</sup> Smet 1954, 74-5: *verba ipsius Domini Fratris Petri in cor imperatoris intraverant et ipsum mollificaverunt, necnon et aliorum quam plurimorum baronum Graecorum.*

<sup>10</sup> Smet 1954, 74: *ab antiquo Graeci separati sunt ab ecclesia, et multoties in tractatibus ecclesiam Romanam illuserunt.*

remember the sins of his sons [the Byzantines]"<sup>11</sup> and the Byzantine patriarch, whom the emperor had promised in his letter to depose in favour of a Latin-faith one, is denounced as "perfidious".<sup>12</sup>

Such literary portraits suggest that, in Mézières' text, there is an imbalance in the relationship of power between the Byzantines and Peter Thomas, nor can it be *a priori* excluded that, in order to celebrate the latter, the author deliberately falsified some important aspects of the mission itself. If then, as it seems, da Canal was familiar, either directly or through intermediary sources, with the *Life*, it would mean that his depiction of John V was inspired by quite an unbalanced (if not a deliberately biased) account.

At this point, it should be noted that da Canal's iconographic representation further unbalances this power relationship, presenting a completely falsified image of the emperor. In fact, Mézières describes John V's conversion before Peter Thomas, but never alludes to the emperor bowing before the bishop. For the Byzantines, the emperor was the *defensor*, the 'defender' and representative of the Church.<sup>13</sup> Publicly kneeling before a Latin bishop in Constantinople would likely have meant acknowledging the latter's spiritual supremacy. This would have been a powerful symbolic act, one fraught with danger for the Byzantine emperor and his religious authority.

An account of John V bowing before a western churchman is found among the curial sources that record his 1369 visit to Rome and official conversion there.<sup>14</sup> This detail is provided by the *Iter Italicum Urbani V* (henceforth, the *Iter*), recorded by the Occitan writer Bertrand Boyssset in the fifteenth century but dating back to an eyewitness, a certain Garoscus de Ulmoisca.<sup>15</sup> The *Iter*, which only covers the period from Urban V's departure for Rome until his return to Avignon (1367-70), contains a vivid description of the emperor's reception at St Peter's: the pope, surrounded by his cardinals, was seated at the top of the steps. Upon arrival, the emperor knelt three times, then kissed the pope's feet, hands, and mouth. The pope took the emperor by hand, and they entered the church singing *Te Deum*, where

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**11** Smet 1954, 74: *filiorum peccata non recordans*.

**12** Smet 1954, 75: *patriarcham Graecum perfidum*.

**13** See above all Dagron 1996.

**14** These sources are: the *First Life* of Pope Urban V, an anonymous text, and the *Second Life*, written by the apostolic secretary Werner of Hasselbeck, a contemporary of the related events. The *Second Life*, in particular, after referring to the chrysobull of John V containing his profession of faith, describes the encounter between the emperor and the pope which took place the next Sunday (21st October): John V ascended the stairs of St Peter's, then he entered the basilica with Urban V, and the pope celebrated mass. Cf. Kolditz 2022, 497-501.

**15** See Ehrle 1900 and the Introduction to the recent edition of this text by Gautier Dalché, Bonnet, Rigaud 2018, 5-45.

Urban V celebrated mass in the presence of many Byzantines.<sup>16</sup>

The precise significance of this ceremony has recently been discussed by Sebastian Kolditz in his 2022 article dedicated to the reappraisal of John V's conversion in Rome.<sup>17</sup> In particular, he insists on the clear separation between this ceremony, a public one which took place on 21st October, and the act of conversion of John V, which took place on 18th October. The latter was, according to him, orchestrated as a private, if not secret event, and designed by John V himself and his advisers in such a way as to avoid the news of it being made public, especially in Byzantine circles. In fact, John V pronounced his profession of faith in the private chamber of a deacon, far from the gaze of the public, without the pope even being present and in front of few Byzantines (Kolditz 2022, 501-6). Now, since the curial sources do not report that the profession was read during the public ceremony on Sunday, John V's appearance on the steps of St Peter's, with his prostration to the pope, would have manifested itself, as Kolditz states (2022, 505), "not as a gesture of humiliation but of reverence to the supreme pontiff". Thus, if we accept this interpretation, it is possible that the act of bowing before the pope was in no way symbolically connected to the emperor's personal conversion.

In any case, some doubts must be raised about the very credibility of the account of John V's prostration in Rome provided in the *Iter*. This text contains some obvious inaccuracies,<sup>18</sup> and several difficulties persist in identifying the author of the text (Gautier Dalché, Bonnet, Rigaud 2018, 36-8).<sup>19</sup> It must therefore be handled with caution.

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**16** Gautier Dalché, Bonnet, Rigaud 2018, 56: *Item die XXII [sic!] mensis octobris que fuit die dominica, dominus noster papa Urbanus quintus exivit de palacio suo Rome et ivit coram ecclesia sancti Petri super scalam; et ibi erat una cathedra bene parata pro eo cum omnibus cardinalibus et prelatis indutis cum eo. Et papa sedebat in cathedra solus in pontificalibus. Et statim venit inperator Grecorum alias de Costantinoble ad eum. Et tam cito quod vidit papam flexit genua tribus vicibus. Isto facto venit ad papam et osculavit pedes eius, manus et os. Et postea surexit et accepit dominum dictum inperatorem per manum et incepit dicere "Te Deum laudamus" etc. Et intraverunt in ecclesiam Sancti Petri insimul. Et in eadem ecclesia ppapa tancito cantavit missam. Et ibi erat presens dictus inperator cum multa congregatione Grecorum. Et eadem die dominus inperator pranssus fuit cum papa et eciam omnes cardinales.*

**17** See also Pieralli 2016, 102.

**18** According to the *Iter*, the encounter between John V and Pope Urban V took place on Sunday, October 22nd (see *supra*). But the 22nd of that month was actually a Monday.

**19** Boysset borrowed this passage written in Latin from another chronicle, known as the *Iter*. In the manuscripts conveying Boysset's chronicle, the *folii* containing the *Iter* also present a subscription: *et ego talis vidi omnia ista et fui praesens* (Genoa, Bibl. Univ. E.III.18, f. 45r), and *et ego \*\*\*\* et fui presens* (Paris, BnF, Ms. fr. 5728, f. 3r). Some scholars read in this latter subscription the name of 'Garoscus de Ulmoisca Veteri'. However, others have given some different readings of this subscription – such as *et ego iacobus develino ista vidi*, claiming that *develino* meant 'from Avellino' and thus attributing it to a certain Jacobus de Velino. Yet, no chronicle by Jacobus de Velino is known, and this reading is also considered doubtful.

Consequently, as it is the only text to mention John V bowing to the pope, the historicity of the latter's public prostration in Rome cannot be confirmed but deserves further investigation.

Even if this prostration actually took place as the author of the *It-er* claims, given the prudence with which John V seems to have orchestrated his own conversion, this whole scenario not only further weakens the possibility that John V publicly converted in 1357, as reported by Mézières in the *Life*, but above all confirms the subversiveness that the emperor bowing in Constantinople before a Latin bishop who had just witnessed his conversion would have represented. Since it does not feature even in Mézières' account, such a prostration must be regarded as completely improbable. Da Canal's painting, depicting the prostration of a Byzantine emperor in the presence of many Byzantines and influential orthodox clergymen, must therefore be regarded as the visual representation of a historiographical bias.

## 2.2 The 'Poisoning' of John V's Image in Historiography

At this point, one question remains unanswered: why does such an image of prostration and submission exist if no written source alludes to it? As has been said, it is probable that da Canal was familiar with Mézières' work, but it remains difficult to know exactly how the story of Peter Thomas' mission to Constantinople reached the Venetian artist - possibly through some intermediary sources that had become partially corrupted. It is also conceivable that da Canal confused different events in the life of John V, combining elements from the public ceremony that took place in Rome in 1369 with some from the supposed conversion in Constantinople in 1357. Nor can it be ruled out that he drew inspiration from other pictorial representations of the time that depicted similar scenes.<sup>20</sup> However, it is very probable that da Canal, in depicting John V's prostration, was influenced by a historiographical trend that has continued, over several centuries, to blacken and 'poison' the image of this emperor.

Even today, John V has one of the darkest images of any Byzantine emperors, and his reign is still the subject of much negative commentary by contemporary historians: some have spoken of a decline that was so discouraging that no Byzantine historian of the latter half of the fourteenth century wanted to recount the unfortunate events of

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**20** Interestingly, among the six allegorical paintings that the Venetian Senate commissioned from Gregorio Lazzarini in 1694, one depicts the personification of the reconquered Morea region on her knees in front of the representation of Queen Venice. Da Canal knew of this painting, as he describes it in his biography of Lazzarini (da Canal 1809, XXX). The painting in question has been the object of an interesting analysis by Anastasia Stouraiti (2023, 105).



his reign (Nicol [1972] 1993, 253) and have described him as a completely incapable ruler, the laughing stock of the Turks and of the West, indebted in every way to their support in order to remain in power.

The roots of these comments are to be found in previous centuries, when the modern historiographical prejudice towards the 'decadence' of the empire was being created and nurtured. Edward Gibbon, for instance, in his *History of Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), qualifies John V as a "careless spectator of the public ruin". He continues by stating that:

Love, or rather lust, was his only vigorous passion; and in the embraces of the wives and virgins of the city, the Turkish slave [Constantinople] forgot the dishonour of the emperor of the *Romans*. (Womersley 1995, 825)

Gibbon, like others of his contemporaries, allowed himself to be inspired and drawn into this description by the unflattering and humiliating portrayals that some late accounts, both Byzantine and Western, had given of this emperor after his death in 1391. The histories of Doukas and Laonikos Chalkokondyles, the two best-known Byzantine chronicles of the fifteenth century, and long the most widely used for reconstructing the reign of John V, describe him as a man incapable of handling state affairs, who devoted himself to pleasures rather than to the obligations demanded by his position.<sup>21</sup> However, although they are rich in information, these chronicles contain numerous errors. Today's specialists therefore handle them with caution. A fifteenth-century Western chronicle known as the *Chronique de Savoye*<sup>22</sup> and Chalkokondyles' history also report distorted accounts of John V's diplomatic missions to the West, characterising his stays in Hungary and Venice as periods of captivity (Chaubet 2006, 195-6; Darko 1922, 46-7). Even though the historicity of such 'imprisonments' has been disproven (Chrysostomidis 1965; Pall 1971), these versions have long been given credence by modern historiography, becoming emblems of John V's supposedly poor governance. These stories also seem to have spread in Venice: the scholar Francesco Sansovino takes up Chalkokondyles' account of John V's alleged imprisonment in his city in his *Gl'annali Turcheschi overo vite de' principi et signori della casa* (1571).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Grecu 1958, 41; 65-7; 71 and Darko 1922, 75-6. On these two chroniclers, see Déroche, Vatin 2016, 105-9 (for Doukas) and 323-41 (for Chalkokondyles). On Chalkokondyles, see also the monograph dedicated to him by Kaldellis (2014).

<sup>22</sup> On the author of this chronicle, Jean d'Orville, better known under the name of Cabaret, see the article by the text's editor: Chaubet 1992.

<sup>23</sup> Sansovino 1571, 14. On Francesco Sansovino, see the recently published collection of articles dedicated to him by D'Onghia, Musto 2019.

Profoundly influenced by these *légendes noires*, modern historiography has also long interpreted John V's conversion to the Latin faith as an act of political submission, to the point that even some recent publications assert that "no other Byzantine emperor had abased himself so profoundly to the papacy, which *ipso facto* reveals the extent of John's despair over the future of his realm" (Reinert 2002, 269).

Given his education, it is very likely that da Canal was influenced by this historiographical tradition. His figurative portrait of John V should therefore not only be regarded as a product of this tendency, but also as a means of its perpetuation, proposing a distorted relationship of power in which John V stands in a position of forced submission. Da Canal's painting accentuates the supremacy of the Latin Church over the Byzantine one, but also, especially given the early modern context of its creation, that of the West over the East. As the only known figurative representation of this emperor in the West, da Canal's painting is emblematic of one of the counterfeit images that traditional historiography has spread of John V: that of a Byzantine emperor subjected before the Latin West.

### **3 The Literary Portraits of John V in the Work of Philippe de Mézières: At the Origin of a Historiographical Distortion**

In the face of this traditional perspective, historians have begun to refute the decadent vision of John V and his reign, and to reassess his actions as ruler of a state in crisis. As we have seen, some traditionally accepted facts about this emperor's life, such as his alleged imprisonments, have been disproven, and a new interpretation of his personal conversion, with an emphasis on his own initiative, has also been recently proposed.<sup>24</sup> Above all, Raúl Estangüi Gómez (2014), in his monograph dedicated to the last centuries of the Byzantine Empire, has shown that John V was able to adapt the functioning of the state to changing circumstances on several fronts. As a result, even though the Byzantine state suffered an important territorial collapse during the reign of John V, largely as a result of the Ottoman advance, it seems that the intense criticism of this emperor cannot simply be attributed to his poor governance. The reasoning behind such invective must be sought elsewhere.

Sources contemporary with the reign of John V, both Byzantine and Latin, should therefore be examined anew in response to this historiographical shift, in order to reconstruct the 'origin' of the criticism

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<sup>24</sup> See *supra*.

of this emperor, and thus of his blackened image.<sup>25</sup> To this end, and in the light of the importance of these events to da Canal's painting, the following section will reflect on the association between the literary motif of John V's adherence to, then rejection of, the Latin faith and the emergence of his distorted portrayal in the work of Philippe de Mézières. Another text by Mézières, written towards the end of John V's reign, also concerns the emperor and provides a useful comparison to the already analysed passage regarding the encounter between Peter Thomas and John V.

In the *Life*, as has been said, John V and the Byzantines stand in an unbalanced relationship of strength. What has not yet been emphasised, however, is the disappearance from the narrative of the negative traits associated with the Byzantines after John V's (alleged) conversion. His submission, together with that of some of his subjects, seems to endow them with a more positive characterisation at the end of the account. Once converted, in fact, the Byzantines are renewed in their vigour for holy war against the Turks and the establishment of peace in the Church.<sup>26</sup> Not only can the conversion therefore be understood as a passage to 'sameness', which for Mézières means becoming the representatives of a 'crusading' ideology, but the future of John V's realm itself depends on this act of obedience.<sup>27</sup> Conversion is thus no longer just a religious act, but also a political one, involving the salvation of the empire.

This suggests that John V's profession also represented, in the eyes of the author, a qualitative passage from 'bad' to 'good'. As noted by Petkov (1997, 258), Mézières indeed spares the Byzantines "any negative connotation for the time being" because of the recently concluded conversion. More proof in this regard is provided by another episode recounted in the *Life*: the mission that Peter Thomas carried out in Serbia in 1355 to convert another sovereign, the tsar Stephen

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**25** My doctoral thesis, on which I am currently working under the supervision of Marie-Hélène Blanchet, deals with political criticism of John V in Byzantium. It is entitled *La critique politique à Byzance à la fin de la période paléologue: transgression, subversion et contrôle de l'espace public durant les règnes de Jean V et Manuel II (1354-1425)*.

**26** Smet 1954, 80: *et laetantes animabantur contra Turcos ad sustinendum bella Dei in pace ecclesiae*.

**27** Similarly, the curial accounts that speak of John V's conversion in Rome, which have been analysed by Kolditz in his aforementioned article (2022, 497-501), limit themselves to reporting details about the emperor's adherence to the Latin faith and never venture into denigrating comments on the imperial figure. There is no evidence of John V being humiliated in these sources, and the depiction of the emperor himself does not carry any negative connotations. On the contrary, one account even emphasises the spirit of conviviality that developed between Urban V and John V after the latter's conversion, when the emperor, it is said, would attend the pope's meals to discuss matters of faith with him (Albanès, Chevalier 1897, 392).

Dušan (r. 1331-55).<sup>28</sup> This time, Peter Thomas was unsuccessful in his conversion attempts, and the mission was a failure. Mézières gives a caricatured description of this ruler's physical appearance, providing details about his enormous stature and terrible face (Smet 1954, 67-8). He states that the sovereign claimed that his subjects kissed his feet and goes on to describe the extreme measures Dušan adopted towards those who attended Latin mass, gouging out their eyes.<sup>29</sup> While John V is depicted as a pious sovereign, whose conversion brings the possibility of salvation for his realm, Dušan acquires all the characteristics of an 'evil ruler', eventually becoming a *tyranno indurato* (68).

The opinion of Mézières on John V, however, seems to have changed by 1389 (two years before the emperor's death), when the French scholar published *Le songe du vieil pèlerin* (henceforth, *Le songe*), an allegorical treatise written this time in Middle French and dedicated to Charles VI of France (r. 1380-1422) as a manual of instruction in matters of personal virtue and royal behaviour. By this time, the political landscape of the Byzantine state had drastically changed. During the second half of John V's reign, his policy of rapprochement with the Latin West tapered off. Apart from the failure of the negotiations with the pope and the Venetians in 1369-71, the possibility of a cohabitation with the Ottomans was beginning to take shape in Byzantine society over those years, especially among the elite. In 1376, John V's firstborn son, Andronicus IV, usurped the throne and recognised Ottoman sovereignty over Byzantium (Cf. Estangüi Gómez 2014, 222-69). John V's policy after his resumption of power in 1379 therefore had to adapt to this condition of vassalage towards the Ottomans. Despite imperial efforts to ensure the survival of the empire, the Ottomans set out to conquer a large part of the Balkans in the last quarter of the fourteenth century (271-313).

Mézières' *Le songe*, which recounts a journey undertaken by Queen Truth, accompanied by Peace, Mercy and Justice in search of a realm worthy of their presence,<sup>30</sup> also contains a little-known depiction of John V and the situation in the Byzantine Empire at the time. In the 23rd chapter, Queen Truth meets Desperate Devotion, a dishevelled old lady who has arrived from the East (from the *isles d'orient et de l'Archepeleque*), hoping to obtain help against the Turks - exactly as John V had done some twenty years earlier. The

<sup>28</sup> On Stephen Dušan's reign, see Soulis 1984.

<sup>29</sup> Smet 1954, 67: *fecit etenim praeconizare quod nullus Christianus ecclesiae Romanae sub privatione oculorum missae ipsius Domini Fratris Petri nuntii papalis interest*. Cf. Petkov 1997, 259.

<sup>30</sup> The manuscript, Paris, BnF, Ms. fr. 22542 (fifteenth century), f. 31r contains a miniature of their journey through the lands of schismatic Christians: for a description, see Bourassa 2015, 100-1; for the miniature, see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bs-tv1b53247203h/f79.item>.

queen, however, refuses to help the lady, feeling that “your people of the islands have abandoned me” (*vos gens des isles m'ont habandonnee*) (Blanchard 2015, 241), and, in justifying her decision, she cites emperor John V as the reason for her indignation.

Les uns de vos gens par envie ont faulsé le testament de mon Pere, et fait division des enfans a la mere, de l'espouse au mary, ensivant celui qui s'appele moderateur des Romeeins, c'est l'empereur sismatique de la cité jadis Bisance appellee, et ores Constantinoble, et ses calogeros aussy, orgueilleux et ypocrites, en la montaigne le peuple decevant, voire celui empereur appellé Jehan Paliologos, souverain chief de la division de la cote de mon tresamé Pere, et contre son sacrement et sa profession. Car .ii. fois depuis .xx. ans il a esté reconciliés a l'esglise de Romme, et renoncé en publique au sisme tresmaudit, l'une foiz en la main de frere Piere Thomas, solempnel maistre en theologie, de l'ordre des Carmelites, et le legat apostolique a l'empereur susdit; l'autre fois en la main du benoit Urbain quint, en la cité de Romme. Et tantost qu'il fu retournés en Constantinoble, il ne donnast pas un noble de sacrement qu'il avoit fait. Si demeure chetis et habandonnés de mon Pere, comme dessus est plus plainement desclairié, tel chief de sisme et de heresie, avec son obstiné patriarche, vostre gent sivent et tu, vieille messagiere, en moy laissant, et la clarté de ma sainte doctrine. (Blanchard 2015, 244-5)

Some of your people, out of envy, have betrayed my Father's wishes and have separated the children from their mother, the wife from her husband, following the one who is called moderator of the Romans - that is, the schismatic emperor of the city formerly called Byzantium and now Constantinople - together with his monks, proud and hypocritical, deceiving the people on the mountain, namely that emperor called John Palaiologos, the sovereign captain of the separation from my most beloved Father's side, in spite of his communion and his profession. For twice in twenty years he has been reconciled with the Church of Rome, and has publicly renounced the most cursed schism: once through the hand of brother Peter Thomas, the famous master of theology of the Carmelite order and apostolic legate to the aforementioned emperor; the second time through the hand of the blessed Urban V, in Rome. Yet as soon as he returned to Constantinople, he gave no proof of the communion he had made. So this captain of schism and heresy remains captive and abandoned by my Father, as has already been more fully explained, along with his obstinate patriarch, followed by your people and by you too, old messenger, abandoning me and the clarity of my holy doctrine.

This account has been briefly commented on by Petkov (1997), who highlights how Mézières began to attribute responsibility for the territorial collapse of the Byzantine state to the sins of orthodox Christians. The possibility of a crusade was, in Mézières' eyes, less and less conceivable, because the expedition would be caught in the Turkish danger on its way to the Holy Land. For this reason, according to Petkov, Mézières created in *Le songe* a "highly negative picture to undermine their [the Byzantines] image in the West" (1997, 265): the French scholar was prepared to let the Ottomans keep what they had conquered in order to punish the orthodox sinners (265).

The overwhelmingly negative picture found in the passage above stems from a specific cause: namely, John V's non-fulfilment of his commitment made to the Latin Church. In fact, in *Le songe* the orthodox Byzantines represent a subversive otherness, an entity which produces 'dissent'. John V, despite his (alleged) double oath and conversion, is no longer perceived as subject to the Latin faith, but has become a "schismatic emperor", while the Byzantine monks and the patriarch are described as proud, hypocritical, and obstinate.

All of them, as rebels, are "captives" and "abandoned" by God.<sup>31</sup> This portrait is overflowing with negative traits, both religious and political. Mézières not only blames the character of the Byzantine people, but also inveighs against the condition of the Byzantine state in this moment of crisis: it is a kingdom abandoned by God. Just as submission to the Latin faith had once offered John V a chance of saving his country, his opposing actions of betrayal and disobedience here serve as a pretext for tracing the portrait of an evil ruler, a tyrant who is responsible for the desperate situation of his ungodly empire. The origin of the literary deformation of John V in Mézières' production therefore seems to maintain an important link with the emperor's rejection of the Latin faith.

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<sup>31</sup> On the Latins' perception of the Byzantines as 'schismatic', see for example Chris-  
sis 2019.

## 4 Conclusions

The origin of the negative distortion of John V's literary image in Philippe de Mézières' work seems to be intimately bound up with the emperor's slide away from his conversion and the Church of Rome. Whilst Mézières' *Life*, written in the 1360s, presents a neutral, if not positive, opinion of the emperor as a result of his religious submission, *Le songe*, composed at the end of John V's reign, focuses on his 'rebellion', and apostasy from his profession of faith. Such 'disobedience' on the part of John V engenders an increasingly negative portrayal of Byzantium, one which involves not only religious elements, accusations of schismatism and heresy, but also critiques concerning the difficult political situation of the empire, for which he is responsible. The image of a 'captive', submissive emperor, in the political as well as the religious sphere, paradoxically originates, in Mézières' work, from his perception of John V's rebellion.

While the early portraits of John V in these fourteenth-century Western accounts are varied, and even conflicting, later and modern historiography has focused almost exclusively on the subservient characterisation of this emperor, relegating his religious submissions to humiliation and passivity and nullifying his political initiative, creating a false historiographical bias against him. The same process can be seen at work in da Canal's representation. None of the written sources attest to the prostration of John V before Peter Thomas. Da Canal's painting is therefore not only a product of this calumnious historiographic tendency, since the image itself combines different events in the life of John V as told in Latin sources that are unbalanced or of doubtful credibility, but has also played a role in propagating this enduring tendency through its distorted representation of John V.

## Abbreviations

ASV = Archivio Segreto Vaticano  
Bibl. Univ. = Biblioteca Universitaria  
BnF = Bibliothèque nationale de France

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