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‘Nationalist’ discourse and the political myth  
in the *Memoranda*  
of Georgios Gemistos Plethon

The idea which seems to be intuitively evoked by the person of Plethon is that of an inherent paradox<sup>1</sup>. Unquestionably, he was one of the most (if not indeed the most) intellectually influential and prominent figure of his times. At the same time, the body of data regarding his life is painfully scarce. The answer to the question of Plethon’s purported paganism has raised academic dispute of almost biblical proportions and the views of scholars diverge from one extreme hypothesis to the other – from perceiving the *Nómoi* as an esoteric handbook for a secret pagan brotherhood in Mistra, to seeing it as a product of a handicapped mind, traumatized by the downfall of the empire<sup>2</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> “In considering those [Plethon’s] beliefs, we encounter a paradox: the same man composed a tract on the Greek doctrine of the procession of the Holy Ghost and an edition of the Chaldean Oracles”. GARNSEY, 2007: 328.

<sup>2</sup> For a synopsis of diverging views on Plethon’s paganism see HLADKY, 2014: 188–189; MAVROUDI, 2013: 178–179. On diverse interpretations of the *Nómoi* see SINIOSSOGLOU, 2011: 150–154. I agree with Hladky’s initial statement that the best we can do is to suspend one’s judgement regarding Plethon’s paganism (although he finally leans to-

to name but a few. The fiery debate over Plethon's alleged nationalism, triggered by 19<sup>th</sup> century Greek intellectual elite, desperately seeking national identity of the nascent state, remains unresolved up until now<sup>3</sup>, while the shaky ground of national and ethnic sentiments involved in it had blurred this already shadowy picture.

Such conflicting currents in the discussion Plethon's political ideas are probably much owed to a single phrase which the philosopher included in his *Memorandum* to the emperor Manuel II Palaiologos, which reads as follows: "Ἕλληνες ἔσμεν τὸ γένος. This striking declaration triggered a heated and prolific discussion over Byzantine identity and, more generally, over the point of birth of national consciousness in the history of mankind. Undoubtedly, Woodhouse neatly captured this inherent equivocality, picturing Plethon as "the last of the Hellenes in the sense of Pagans of the classical age, and the first of the Greeks in the sense of modern nationalists" (WOODHOUSE, 1986: 7). Hence, Plethon's implied nationalism will be my core focus point of the presented article. The texts which I shall use to explore this question are two *Memoranda* concerning the affairs in the Peloponnese, a letter regarding the reform of the garrison on the Isthmus (*De Isthmo*), two imperial funeral orations on the death of empresses Cleope and Helen along with a few excerpts from Gemistos' *Νόμοι*.

Surprisingly enough, numerous scholars applied the term 'nationalism' to Plethon's political works without any reservation<sup>4</sup>. However, the very notions of a 'nation',

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wards acknowledging Gemistos' Orthodoxy, see 2014: 285). The notion of 'neo-paganism' understood as a criticism of Christianity and redefining what it means to be a 'true Christian' might be helpful to some extent, for which see MAVROUDI, 2013: 181, but doubt must persist.

<sup>3</sup> On the discussion of Plethon and Modern Greek identity see RASZEWSKI 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Siniosoglou writes cautiously about 'proto-nationalism': SINIOSGLOU, 2011: 120, 351–352; but Woodhouse in his insightful and ex-

an 'ethnic group', 'nationalism' as well as 'ethnicity' are sensitive and imbued with emotive power: they must be used with an utmost caution, especially if one takes into consideration the fact that no standard definition of these terms has been agreed as yet. While there is a seemingly broad consensus that nationalism as well as a nation-state are modern phenomena, at least some scholars do suggest that some form of group 'national' consciousness must have existed in medieval times (KALDELLIS, 2007: 76). This is not an implausible hypothesis, but otherwise bristled with difficulties of anachronistic imposition. Nonetheless, it still does not make the translation of the terms of 'ἔθνος' or 'γένος' any easier<sup>5</sup>. Accordingly, a doubt must per-

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haustive monograph on Plethon treats the subject as follows: "The most conspicuous feature of the three texts is their patriotic spirit. They point to a nationalist revival, which was Gemistos' favourite theme throughout his life. Nationalism to him meant Hellenism, which he associated with the Peloponnese" WOODHOUSE, 1986: 107. N.P. Peritore speaks about "national myth", but also of "national unity" and "national mobilization" without discussing any of these terms (PERITORE, 1977: 168–191). Hladky, in his discussion of Plethon's reforms writes about "contemporary nations" of the Turks and the Byzantines: (HLADKY, 2014: 13). For a compelling study of Hellenism and nationalism in Byzantium see MAGDALINO 1991.

<sup>5</sup> In his recent article Siniosoglou, discussing the terms *genos* and *ethnos* in the *Memoranda*, rightly contends that the very phenomenon of existentialism might be much older than the modern era (SINIOSOGLOU, 2014). While it cannot be doubted that Plethon's *genos/ethnos* does indeed denote a social group based upon shared culture and ancestry, I believe that equating it with 'Greek nation' is a gross exaggeration (Ibid.: 2014: 426). Shared set of values is certainly a pre-condition of every nation, yet, national identity is channelled through the very existence of a nation-state which was a phenomenon utterly alien to the Middle Ages. Nationalism is, after all, a mass movement on behalf of the state – while the number of individuals who might have endorsed Plethon's view could have probably been narrowed down to a couple of dozens at the very maximum. Simultaneously, I subscribe to Siniosoglou's statement that on the rhetorical level there are striking parallels between the discourse of the *Memoranda* and modern nationalist dis-

sist whether we are still talking about an ethnic group or already about a nation. "This is always a headache," as M. Angold commented on the issues of Greek and Latin transliteration (ANGOLD, 1984: 4) and a similar statement can be made about any dispute of nationalism.

## Discursive formation of social identities

Jonathan Hall in his study of ethnicity in Greek Antiquity has convincingly argued that one cannot discover any objective criteria (such as genetics, language and religion) of ethnic ascription. Traditional outlooks on nationalism traced the origins of modern nations to the times immemorial, seeing them as a given of human existence<sup>6</sup>. The modernists took great pains to falsify this claim, describing a nation as an artificial construct which serves the purpose of the ruling elites, as the so-called instrumentalists postulated. Current theories, chiefly the ethno-symbolism proposed by A.D. Smith, tend to follow the middle way: while nations are modern phenomena which rose out of the fires of French Revolution, they were created out of ethnic cores. Smith's ethno-symbolism accentuates the inalienable role of ethnic/national symbols, memory and myths in the creation of nations. It seems that ethno-symbolism along with the theory of discursive formation of social identities, instilled by powerful symbols and constructed

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course. Yet, Plethonean Hellenic *genos* amounts to nothing more than a core out of which the future Greek nation might have risen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and under no circumstances, in my opinion, can it be simply translated as 'the nation of the Greeks'.

<sup>6</sup> On a survey of various theories of nationalism see CONVERSI, 2007: 15–21; SMITH, 2009: 3–8; HUTCHINSON, 1994: 3–13, OZKIRIMLI, 2010: 49–137; on primordialism and perennialism: SMITH, 2003: 145–169.

through literary discourse, might rescue us from falling to the above-mentioned extremes of perennialism and modernism<sup>7</sup>.

Thus nations, as it seems, are neither perennial, nor are they deliberate artifacts of the ruling classes. On the contrary, according to the ethno-symbolists, a nation possesses some degree of objectivity (owing to its *objective* ethnic basis), on the other hand, according to Smith, nations are social groups which are *discursively constructed* and based on inter-subjectivity of its constituent parts, namely – the individuals. In this light, an ethnic (or national) identity is essentially a *subjective belief* with strong racial, historical and territorial associations (PAGE, 2008: 11, SMITH, 2009: 13). It realizes only within the boundaries of a group and every member of the group shares similar belief of common descent. This conviction, being a social construct, does not have to bear any relation to the reality whatsoever (PAGE, 2008: 12), it always emerges in opposition to a contrasting ‘other’ (Ibid.: 11).

The nexus of elements of a nation as well as an ethnic group, according to the ethno-symbolists, is constituted by its myths, history, traditions and symbols. None nationalist movement can ever be conceived as existing without these fundamental parts. *Myths of common descent* and common origin locate the group in a certain place (i.e. fa-

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<sup>7</sup> On basic claims of ethnosymbolism see SMITH, 2009: 8–19. Also: CONVERSI, 2007: 15–21, OZKIRIMLI, 2010: 143–165; SMITH, 2003: 170–198. Stouraitis acknowledges this lack of extremity in ethno-symbolistic approach by stating as follows: “This theoretical framework pays due heed to the fact that populations are systematically classified as cultural collectivities through ethnonyms in the historiographical narratives, but also that these narratives mainly represent the views of literate social élites and do not, therefore, a priori reflect the identities of broader segments of the named populations. This anticipates the dangers of groupism and reification of ethnicity. Moreover, as opposed to primordialism, ethnicity is here seen as a social construct that comes and goes” (STOURAITIS, 2014: 207).

therland) and time (hence endow them with the beginning point) and they define identity shared by the group. Ethnicity, moreover, just as nationalism, is fundamentally *historical*. For each ethnic group the present does not exist without the past and *vice versa*. Ethnicity entails a constant reinterpretation of group's ethnic past, which is adapted to present circumstances in order to set the direction of the current action and of social change. This, in A.D. Smith's terms, is an ethno-history – that is not a cold scientific analysis of the past conducted by a historian, but rather a mode of comprehending and interpreting the present through the mirror of past events (SMITH, 2009: 29).

Nationalism, as Magdalino warns, is “one of those words which one applies to the ancient and medieval worlds at the risk of one's scholarly credibility [...]” (MAGDALINO, 1984: 58). Hence, fully aware of the fact that using the term nationalism to Plethon's political works might be both disputable and anachronistic, I shall use a reserved meaning of ‘national discourse’ to denote the following:

- i) The programme of a thorough social change as proposed by Plethon at the prospect of succumbing to Turkish domination and an overwhelming role of the political myth within it;
- ii) The ethnic and national basis of the reforms the aim of which is the “national” mobilisation and securing the future for the reformed state;
- iii) The ethnic language of discourse, based heavily on the notion of shared culture, common descent and common historical territory;
- iv) The construction and redefinition of national identity with its emphasis on ‘Hellenism’ and departure from the ‘traditional’ Romanness<sup>8</sup> of the Byzantines;

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<sup>8</sup> “In this regard, one could plausibly argue that up to the twelfth century Romanness as a politico-cultural discourse of self-identification

Therefore, instead of answering the question whether Plethon was the first Greek nationalist, or even a nationalist in general, I propose to analyse his political writings from a yet different angle, namely that of rhetorical technique. In other words, the question that I shall attempt to address is what rhetorical means may be applied in political discourse in order to crystallise and instil group identity of the addressees. To this end I shall analyse the texts in question by means of the restricted model of nationalism outlined above along with a model of the political myth<sup>9</sup>, without which no social identity can last and thrive. I am firmly convinced that both of the afore-mentioned notions might contribute to our better understanding of Gemistos' political ideas.

### The political myth – a model

Ernst Cassirer, tracing the resurgence of the political myth in his times in *The Myth of the State*, writes: "In desperate situations man will always have recourse to desperate means – and our present-day political myths have been such desperate means. If reason has failed us, there remains always the *ultima ratio*, the power of the miraculous and the mysterious" (CASSIRER, 1946: 279). Yet, how can

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concerned mainly the members of a social upper stratum, whose social status and literacy enabled their active participation in the political system as well as access to a literate culture that was produced and circulated on the level of the élite's the two main means that configured a solid Roman identity/ideology". STOURAITIS, 2014: 204

<sup>9</sup> The only extended analysis of Plethon's political myth was, to my knowledge, proposed by PERITORE, 1977. However, Peritore evaluates Plethon's myth mainly from the point of view of historical veracity which, in my opinion, is unnecessary.



we conceive of the concept of the political myth? Both traditional and modern frameworks put an accent on its narrative structure, as opposed to that of story<sup>10</sup>. As Chiara Boticci remarks, a narrative is constructed by a series of events which are presented systematically; it is the way in which the receiver is familiarised with a certain action (BOTICCI, 2007: 110–115). The role of the receiver is of utmost importance here: narratives make sense only when there is a speaker and a receiver; the context within which the narrative occurs is essential for it to convey any meaning at all.

Boticci perceives the political myth as “a process of work on common narrative by which the members of social group provide significance to their political conditions and experience” (BOTICCI & CHALLAND, 2006: 316). She follows the conclusion of Cassirer and Douffé, who define the political myth as “collective desire personified” (CASSIRER, 1946: 280). Christopher Flood, on the other hand, captures the political myth as “an account of political events which is true for the social group which believes it” (FLOOD, 1996: 8), or as a mode of ideological discourse (Ibid.: 13). Kanavou, on her part, discerns that the source of the political can be found in the act of reinterpreting or reworking traditional mythical material in such a way that it gains political significance<sup>11</sup>. Such myths are created in order to constitute political self-definition of social groups

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<sup>10</sup> On μύθος/λόγος, storytelling/reason opposition see FLOOD, 1996: 6. TUDOR, 1972: 137–140.

<sup>11</sup> Just as sacred myths: Myth, according to Blumenberg’s framework, names the unknown and thereby renders the world comprehensible; it erases the fear of emptiness: “What is archaic is the fear not so much of what one does not yet know as merely of one is not acquainted with. As something one is not acquainted with, it is nameless; as something nameless it cannot be conjured up or appealed to or magically attacked [...]. All trust in the world begins with names with which stories are told”. BLUMENBERG, 1990: 35.

or justify political development. They are also “intentional histories” which combine myth with history and which guard the persistence of collective identity (KANAVOU, 2011: 383). These are the features which tie the political myth to the national discourse (OTILIA, 2007: 67).

In addition, political myths are artificial constructs and their ultimate source is crisis, or social trauma (FLOOD, 1996: 80). According to Cassirer, crisis is a “natural soil upon which political myths could grow up and in which they find ample nourishment” (CASSIRER, 1946: 278). When men are bound to withstand a task which surpasses their physical resources, continues Cassirer, they resort to magic. A learned, civilized and sophisticated *homo faber* falls back on magical practices and mythology. Thus, political myths are extremely refined constructs (Ibid.: 280–281). A politician who constructs the political myth is simultaneously a *homo magus* and a *homo faber*; he is “the priest of entirely new religion. But when he has to defend this religion, he proceeds very methodically” (Ibid.: 282)<sup>12</sup>. There are some occurrences which cannot be simply demonstrated without any resort to persuasive images: the readiness to die for one’s country cannot be grasped by rational means (BOTICCI, 2007: 160; OTILIA, 2007: 67).

For Cassirer, the political myth gains its force from the magical use of words. As opposed to semantic use of words which entails describing the reality as it is, magical application of linguistic terms does not depict anything; it aims at producing certain effects in the listener. A magical word gains supremacy over a semantic word; the meaning of the latter is inevitably altered. This feature is further fuelled by the fact that the political myth cannot be falsified: it does not have any author, it skillfully purports to describe reality as it is. In Tudor’s terms, political

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, Tudor criticized Cassirer’s insistence upon the sacred element of the political myth. TUDOR, 1972: 33–36.

myths are by-products of practical thinking: they can be judged only on the basis of their plausibility (i.e. probability of their realization)<sup>13</sup>.

However, magical application of words is not enough: it requires rites which will support it. These rites change men's perceptions and thereby control their actions: "Every political action has its special ritual. And since, in the totalitarian state there is no private sphere independent of political life, the whole life of man is suddenly inundated by a high tide of rituals. [...] Every class, every sex and every age has a rite of its own, no one could walk in the street without performing a political ritual" (CASIRER, 1946: 286). *Homo magus* in Cassirer's framework is also a *homo divinans*, he is a prophet who fulfils the will of gods. As a public fortune-teller he uses prophecy as the ultimate technique of ruling, he offers the most improbable promises which are sanctified by the gods. At the same time, he is a medic: a *homo divinans* offers the cure to all evils.

### Discursive formation of identities: a case-study of 15<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantium

Before turning to Plethon's texts themselves, I shall focus on one salient feature of ethnic self-ascription, namely its discursive character. Byzantine elite identity was without any doubt chiefly Roman: the Byzantines called themselves Ῥωμαῖοι and were the subjects of the βασιλεὺς

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<sup>13</sup> TUDOR, 1972: 123: „[...] when practical considerations are foremost, men tend to believe what, at that moment, they find it convenient or necessary to believe. [...] Indeed, it is plain that if a myth is to be a practical argument, the chief condition for its success is that it be understood as a true narrative of events”.

τῶν Ῥωμαίων. Nonetheless, the consciousness of Hellenic past was undoubtedly present<sup>14</sup>. While in the earlier period of the Byzantine state the term ‘Hellene’ was used in derogatory contexts (SINIOSSOGLOU, 2011: 54–62; STOURAITIS, 2014: 208)<sup>15</sup>, it was rehabilitated in the eleventh century (KALDELLIS, 2007: 190–195; STOURAITIS, 2014: 210–213). The Byzantines, however, did not detach themselves from the Roman identity<sup>16</sup> even up until 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century (KALDELLIS, 2007: 338). While 12<sup>th</sup> century was a period of unprecedented interest in classical Greek literature, numerous additions to the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* and anathemas upon Hellenic learning served as the symbols of the entrenchment Orthodox Church (KAZHDAN & EPSTEIN, 1985: 126–130, 158–163; MAGDALINO, 1992: 383–384). The conquest of the Fourth Crusade in 1204 incited various intellectuals in the 13<sup>th</sup> century turn their attention to their Hellenic identity, reborn as a result of tension which presence of the Latins exerted on the prevailing cultural identity of the Byzantines.

Hesychastic controversy of the 14<sup>th</sup> century was a theological debate of complex nature and it is not a proper

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<sup>14</sup> “They might call themselves Romans and remember proudly that theirs was the legitimate Roman Empire. Still more, they were Christians, to whom pagan learning was of secondary importance in comparison with the Christian revelation. But their language was Greek, their literature was written in Greek; and the works of the ancient Greek world were still studied and admired”. RUNCIMAN, 1970: 14–15. On the discussion of (highly questionable, in my opinion) possibility of existence of the Byzantine Nation-State: KALDELLIS, 2007: 46–112; STOURAITIS, 2014: 178, 185–190.

<sup>15</sup> Angold notes that the first attested use of the ethnonym ‘Hellenes’ to denote ‘the Byzantines’ can be found in the 12<sup>th</sup> century letter composed by George Tornikes. (ANGOLD, 1995: 512). On the ‘anti-Latin’ character of the term in the Nicaean court see also ANGOLD, 1995: 527–528.

<sup>16</sup> KALDELLIS, 2007: 338. Stouraitis presents valuable insights into the elitism of Byzantine Roman ethnic self-ascription: STOURAITIS, 2014: 180–191, on the elite’s ethnic discourse of distinction: 199–200; on the exclusion of the illiterate masses: *Ibid.*: 196–197

place to investigate its intricacies in depth. What is of interest to me, however, is the fact that it cannot be reduced to a mere debate over God's energies and human cognition of God's nature<sup>17</sup>. In reality, it might be read as a clash of two incompatible 'grand narratives'<sup>18</sup>: that of apophatic Orthodox theology of Palamism and that of rationalistic anti-Hesychasm, Hellenic and heterodox in its essence. The so called 'monastic takeover', the seizure of Church's administration by a purely monastic and Hesychastic clergy, combined with an utter dissolution of imperial secular power in the Byzantine state, resulted in a gradual increase of patriarchal control over the throne of *basileus* of the Romans. Meyendorff paints the gloomy state of the empire in the following words: "A new power acquired by the Church, now ruled mainly by the monastic party, a power that the emperors were too weak to challenge seriously [...] the empire had practically ceased to exist. But the Church was keeping its influence on the people" (In SINOSSOGLU, 2011: 115).

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<sup>17</sup> "In response to the claim that God is utterly unknowable and therefore cannot be experienced in prayer, Gregory developed a distinction, already present in the Byzantine tradition, between God's essence (*ousia*) and his energies or activities (*energeiai*) arguing that in his essence God is unknowable but that he makes himself known through his activities or energies, which are God himself, and not merely some effect produced by God, and that the divine light experienced by the hesychasts is one of the divine energies. Much of the argument turned on the interpretation of the Gospel episode of the Transfiguration, in which it was argued that the light beheld by the disciples was the uncreated light, emanating from Christ's divine nature. Gregory's defence was endorsed by the monks of the Holy Mountain, and also by a series of councils in Constantinople". MEYENDORFF, 1979: 141–53.

<sup>18</sup> I use this notion contrary to N. Siniossoglou, who interprets this conflict in essentialist terms of Weberian ideal-types [see SINOSSOGLU, 2011: 19–21]; I am more inclined, following Averil Cameron, to endorse non-essentialist constructivist outlook: CAMERON, 2014: 59.

Pletho's *De differentiis*, his defense of primacy of Plato over Aristotle, subsequent intellectual dispute with George Scholarios and their personal rivalry which ended in casting the Νόμοι to flames, can be grasped as yet another expression of the clash of the above-mentioned narratives of Hellenism and Orthodoxy<sup>19</sup>. The issue at stake was the protection of traditional faith against the overtly pagan and heterodox notions of Plato. "Plethon had equally strong, and no doubt sincere, views on the future well-being of his people, but they contradicted those of Scholarios in nearly every respect. Both men knew that their respective ideologies could not co-exist" (LIVANOS, 2005: 25). While Scholarios' social and theological ideas were deeply rooted in Orthodoxy, Plethon seems to have been thoroughly convinced of the end of Christianity (SINROSSOGLU, 2011: 362) – the only rescue lay in the return to the Hellenic religion of the forefathers.

The intensity of confrontation between these two intellectual notions of reality was further fuelled by the dispute of the union of the Churches and the consequent help of the Western troops against the Turkish army which was lurking at the threshold of the Byzantine Empire. This intense friction is patent in contrasting visions of Byzantine ethnic self-ascription of Ducas' *Historia Turcobyzantina* and Chalkokondyles' *Historiarum Demonstrationes*, both written in 15<sup>th</sup> century. Ducas, having spent a major part of his life in the service of the Genoese, had strong pro-Latin and pro-Unionist sentiments, calls the Byzantines Ῥωμαῖοι, with extremely rare exceptions. Hence Ῥωμαῖοι are ruled by the Emperor, live within the bounds of the empire and swear allegiance to the crown. For the most part, in linguistic surface, it is reflected by the genitive formula,

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<sup>19</sup> On the dispute between Scholarios and Plethon see KARAMANOLIS, 2002, 253–280, SINROSSOGLU, 2011: 125–160, LIVANOS, 2005: 23–37; 2006: 71–94; HLADKY, 2014: 78–9, 82, EVANGELIOU, 2006: 153–170.

to use Gill Page's term (PAGE, 2008), which appears in numerous points of Ducas' text: τὴν γῆν τῶν Ῥωμαίων, τῷ βασιλεῖ τῶν Ῥωμαίων, δυστυχίαι τῶν Ῥωμαίων, ὅσοι τῶν Ῥωμαίων, ἀμαρτίας τῶν Ῥωμαίων, ἐπιτροπὸς τῆς βασιλείας τῶν Ῥωμαίων, πολιτεία τῶν Ῥωμαίων, ὡς βασιλεῖς τῶν Ῥωμαίων, τὰ τῶν Ῥωμαίων, and numerous other phrases. The Romans are the loyal Christian subject of the imperial crown<sup>20</sup>.

On the contrary, Chalkokondyles, Plethon's pupil, wrote his work to praise the glory and great deeds of the Greeks – οἱ Ἑλληνας. The Hellenes, in his eyes, will not only be renowned thanks to their accomplishments, but they will reign all over the world<sup>21</sup>. The most vital part of his consequent epitome of the long history of the Hellenic race (commencing from the mythical times of Heracles and Semele and ending in his times) is the excerpt which concerns the Roman conquest of Greece. Since

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<sup>20</sup> The loyalty factor in Ducas' ethnic ascription is patent in his use of the term Γραικός in the fragment describing the council of Florence which was about to debate the terms of potential Union of the Churches. He refers to Markos, the metropolitan of Ephesos as the "chief spokesman of the Greeks (31.3). Here, Γραικός is used to denote the follower of an anti-Unionist faction within the Byzantine embassy and in the sentence that follows, Ducas presents Markos as a man "educated in the Hellenic sciences". The anti-Unionist sentiment of the *Graikoi* is encapsulated in the following phrase: τὸ ὅπερ λεγούσιν οἱ Γραικοί: ἐκ Πατρὸς καὶ Υἱοῦ (hence: *filioque*) (31.4). On the contrary, the alleged proponents of the union (including, surprisingly given his anti-unionist outlook, Plethon himself along with George Scholarios and John Argyropoulos) are described as follows: οὗτοι δε ἦσαν οἱ μετέχοντες λόγου, ἐκ μέρους δὲ μέρους δὲ καὶ Ῥωμαικοῦ μαθήματος (31.3). On the genitive formula see PAGE, 2008: 46–52.

<sup>21</sup> Chalkokondyles *Hist. Demonstr.* I.2.14–19: καὶ κλέος μὴν αὐτῇ μέγα τὸ παραυτίκα, μείζον δὲ καὶ ἐσαῦθις, ὅποτε δὴ ἀνά βασιλείαν οὐ φαύλην Ἑλλην γε αὐτὸς βασιλεὺς καὶ ἐξ αὐτοῦ ἐσόμενοι βασιλεῖς, οἳ δὴ καὶ οἱ τῶν Ἑλλήνων παῖδες ξυλληγόμενοι κατὰ σφῶν αὐτῶν ἔθιμα ὡς ἥδιστα μὲν σφίσιν αὐτοῖς, τοῖς δὲ ἄλλοις ὡς κράτιστα πολιτεύοιντο.

the era when the Romans had conquered Thrace and took hold of Byzantium, the Greeks gradually mixed with the Roman population, but they managed to retain their language and their customs. The name both of themselves and their country was changed thereafter (*Hist. Demonstr.* I.4). The result of this occurrence was as follows: the rulers of the Byzantine Empire were no longer called Byzantine/Greek kings, but Roman Emperors<sup>22</sup>. Next, Chalkokondyles shortly describes religious disputes between the Hellenes and the Romans (i.e. between the Eastern and the Western church), which resulted in a perpetual discord between the two parts of the empire (*Hist. Demonstr.* I.5–6) – these two groups were finally separated. For Laonikos, Ῥωμαῖοι denote chiefly the Westerners who dwell within the bounds of Old Rome. In the introduction to his historical work, the historian is explicit: the Byzantines are not Romans and, more importantly, neither themselves, nor their Empire are being named correctly (*Hist. Demonstr.* I.6.13–21).

## The myth of the Hellenes

Plethon is mindful of critical footing of the empire: the imminent danger is explicitly expressed and named in all texts in question. The state, says Plethon in the first *Memorandum*<sup>23</sup>, is in a tremendous peril (PG 160, col. 841.C).

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<sup>22</sup> Chalkokondyles *Hist. Demonstr.* I.4.14–16: καὶ τοὺς γε βασιλεῖς Βυζαντίου ἐπὶ τῷ σφᾶς αὐτοὺς Ῥωμαίων βασιλεῖς τε καὶ αὐτοκρατόρας σεμνύνεσθαι ἀποκαλεῖν, Ἑλλήνων δὲ βασιλεῖς οὐκέτι οὐδαμῆ ἄξιον.

<sup>23</sup> The order of the *Memoranda* in *Patrologia Graeca* seems to be, basing on the internal evidence, incorrect. It is widely agreed that the *Address to the Despot Theodore* (marked in PG as *Oratio II*) was de-



The empire is under a constant threat both from lands and from the sea (Ibid.). The enemies who pose major hazard to the empire are the neighbouring barbarians, who have already deprived the crown of majority of the best lands. These savages, continues Plethon, are the descendants of the ancient tribe of Parapamisdae, who were defeated by Alexander the Great while he was on his way to India. Now, after a long time, they surpass the Greeks in strength and are plotting mischievous plans against them (PG 160, col. 843.A). Moreover, in the current state of being, the soldiers who guard off the Isthmus will not be able to repel the attack (*De Isthmo* 309.5–6). Identical threat is equally present and acknowledged in the second speech, yet the context is somewhat different. Local danger in the Peloponnese has been recently repelled: the occasion of this address to the emperor Manuel II was the defeat of Centurione Zaccaria and his Navarrese allies<sup>24</sup> (PG 160, col. 821.A). A short breathing space, Plethon states, which was acquired thanks to the victory, is a good point to undertake necessary reforms that will contribute to the future safety of the state. Similarly, in the *Address to Theodore*, Plethon contends that dire straits of the empire create perfect opportunity to ponder on remedies which can be enacted to rescue the state (PG 160, col. 843.B; *De Isthmo* 309.3–310.2)

Therefore, from the very outset of the speeches, Plethon constructs the political myth – symbolic language of his narrative can be gleaned from his simile of the ship of the state, which appears in the exordium of the *Address to Theodore*. This metaphor is of interest to me for a number of reasons. Firstly, by consciously choosing this concrete

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livered somewhere between 1407–1415, while the Memorandum addressed to the Emperor Manuel dates back to the year 1418. In naming the speeches, I am following their chronology (SMARNAKIS, 2007: 106; WOODHOUSE, 1986: 92).

<sup>24</sup> For the historical context see: WOODHOUSE, 1986: 99; 102.

simile, Plethon sets himself as an heir of ancient Greek political thought: the allusion to Plato's Republic is subtle yet powerful. The idea conveyed by the opening of the second speech closely correlates to Plato's own words in the *Republic* 488a–489a, where Socrates asks Adeimantos to picture the affair of the state as taking place on board of ship or ships. Just as the helmsman on the ship should act according to his own judgement to safeguard his crew (*PG* 160, col. 841.A: καὶ ἐν πλοίῳ κυβερνήτην νενόμισται μὲν ἅπαντα ἄγειν τὰ πρὸς τὴν τῶν ἐμπλεόντων σωτηρίαν ἢ ἂν δοκῆ αὐτῷ) and just as soldiers should be led by one man, the state should be ruled by one individual.

Plethon is therefore preoccupied chiefly with the power of an image, not with a theoretical analysis<sup>25</sup>. The words which the philosopher uses in this passage are indeed different from the ones which can be found in Plato's *Republic*, but the reference to the Athenian philosopher seems to be clear enough. This subtle intertextual allusion is, on one level, a sophisticated compliment directed to the addressee of the speech: it praises Theodore's education. On a different level of reading, this reference works as a link between the contemporary Hellenes and the Greeks of the past and thereby agrees with the line of Plethon's nationalist discourse. From yet another point of view it portrays one of the features of the political myth – politicians take recourse to the myth when the rational modes of thinking fail. As was discerned by Cassirer, the political myth is, from this vantage point, the last stand of a politician.

According to Cassirer's theory, resort to the political myth is equaled with return to the modes of primitive societies. The artisan, or the mythmaker, is also a shaman

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<sup>25</sup> Georges Sorel in his *Reflections of violence* accentuates this trait of symbolic narration by stating: "appeal must be made to collections of images which, taken together and through intuition alone, before any considered analyses are made, are capable of evoking the mass of sentiments [...]". SOREL, 1999: 113.

who offers cure to aid the current situation. The antidote to the current situation, as Plethon warns in the first speech, will be far from pleasant (PG 160, col. 844.B ἐκεῖνο δέ σου δεῖσομαι πρῶτον, εἰ μὴ πάντα δι' ἡδονῆς φαινοίμην λόγους), yet one ought not to prefer that which is likeable over that which is best and most useful and necessary in the current state of the affairs<sup>26</sup>. The doctors, in order to heal the sick, prescribe the most disagreeable foods and potions. The cooks, on the other hand, prepare meals only for the sake of bodily enjoyment (δι' ἡδονῆς) which prove to be harmful to the body to the highest degree. Disagreeable measures, argues Plethon, are most likely to turn out effective. Interestingly enough, the words denoting security (ἀσφαλεία) and restoration (ἐπανόρθωσις) are abundantly present in the three analysed texts and might have conveyed possible medical connotations (LSJ: 266, 609). Cassirer describes the power of such metaphors very accurately: "The sorcerer, if he is right man, if he knows the magic spells, and if he understands how to use them at the right time and in the right order, is the master of everything. [...] The word of the great man is the wise healing word which all can believe in" (CASSIRER, 1946: 283).

This medical vocabulary in the oration addressed to Theodore serves to strengthen the subsequent paragraphs which support the thesis that there is a way out even of the most troublesome position (PG 160, col. 844.C).

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<sup>26</sup> PG 160, col. 844.B: τὰ ὠφελιμώτερά τε καὶ βελτίω πρὸ τῶν ἡδέων αἰρούμενῳ. Similarly in the second *Memorandum*, Plethon argues that the Peloponnesians are like sick people, who expect to be cured by means of necklaces and drugs, while they do not want to change their mode of life which is a condition *sine qua non* to achieve safety of the state, PG 160, col.827.D: ὑπὸ δέ τινων φαρμάκων ἢ καὶ περιάπτων ἔάν τις συμβουλευσῆ αἰεὶ ἂν οἰομένοις σωθῆσθεσθαι. Καὶ δὴ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν τῆδε πραγμάτων μὴ οἰώμεθα ὑπὸ τινων τοιούτων ἔσεσθαι τι ὄφελος, μὴ μεγάλης τινὸς καὶ ἀξιολόγου μεταβολῆς τοῖς ὅλοις γινομένης, καὶ πάντων ἐκείνων ὠνπερ εἶπον ἐπανορθώσεως τυχόντων.

In this passage myth is interwoven historical truth and Plethon, for the first time in the text, reveals himself as a *homo magus*: the crowning aim of his excursus is to prove and justify the necessity of political reforms of the state. Plethon's choice of mythical examples to support his assumption is indeed intriguing. This symbolism is as multifaceted as was in the case of the ship of the state simile<sup>27</sup>.

On a purely literary level such a simile might be read as an employment of a rhetorical cliché – Plethon is simply playing with intertextual references well known to any educated Byzantine. Nonetheless, once we look deeper into the text, we might arrive at a conclusion that this is a fully conscious and profound manipulation of the content of narrative. It is most vivid in author's provoking silence about Christianity: the only possible reference to Christian religion occurs in an excursus on the monks, yet even there Plethon avoids naming his real adversaries. This, from my vantage point, is a purposeful distortion<sup>28</sup>, as Flood has it: "After all, in a finite discourse the selection of information for inclusion necessarily entails the exclusion of other information. The degree of detail and emphasis given to some events represents a choice of precedence as to whether one set will be foregrounded at the expense of other" (FLOOD, 1996: 9). The political myth must direct the audience to the *destination intended by the artisan*.

Let us concentrate on this part of the text to see how adeptly Plethon employs mythical imagery within the 'na-

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<sup>27</sup> The following comment of A. Kaldellis describes this phenomenon well: "The language of mythology does not communicate only through symbols with fixed values (e.g., Ares = war). These symbols activate a shared world of stories that encode a vast array of specific situations. Depending on their usage, the names of heroes and gods (as of Old Testament figures) allude to parallels and models by which readers could better understand or judge their present-day counterparts". KALDELLIS, 2007: 246.

<sup>28</sup> TUDOR, 1972: 122–123.

tional' discourse. Thus, the fundamental theses of these fragments are explicit: firstly, they serve as premises which justify the conclusion that no matter how dangerous one's position is, it can be overcome. Next, a well-founded constitution (πολιτεία σπουδαία) is the only footing of a prosperous state<sup>29</sup>. As far as the first assertion is concerned, Plethon recapitulates in the first *Memorandum* the story of Aeneas (PG 160, col. 845.C). The Trojans, who were led by Aeneas after the destruction of their native city of Troy, reached by chance the shores of Italy. After some time they had raised their state to such a glory that they had become equals to the Sabines and they held the empire which is remembered by all. The Persians, after they had been subjected both to the Hellenes and the Macedonians, had strengthened their state to such degree, that they defeated the glorious Romans who, in consequence, were made to pay them a tribute.

It is precisely in this part of his first *Memorandum* that Plethon commences to manipulate with the meanings of ethnonyms. As I have noticed, Byzantine identity was Roman and the name Ῥωμαῖοι was used as a prevalent ethno-'national' identifier for those who dwelt within the boundaries of the Empire. Analysis of each and every instance of appearance of this name in the *Memoranda*, leads to conclusion that the word Ῥωμαῖοι denotes the ancient Romans. Plethon's consequence in using this term in this context lends credence to this assumption<sup>30</sup>. Thus the Persians were subdued by the Romans (ὑπὸ Ῥωμαίων) and managed to fight back against the Roman state (PG 160, col. 845.D: πρὸς τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἄρχην). Further in

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<sup>29</sup> PG 160, col. 845.A: Οὐ γὰρ ἄλλη αἰτία τοῦ πόλεις εὖ ἢ κακῶς πρᾶττειν ἢ πολεῖα σπουδαία ἢ φαύλη ἐγκαθεστηκυῖα.

<sup>30</sup> It must be noted that in the funeral orations dedicated to Cleope and Helen, Plethon addresses the Byzantines as the Romans (PG 160, col.941.C; PG 160, col.953.D). The context of these speeches is nevertheless different and they lack reformative spirit.

the text the term in question is used to denote the Romans of the Western Empire (*PG* 160, col. 846.D): the Romans had been at the height of their power for as long as their social system remained good (ξὺν ἀρετῇ πολιτείας). No sooner had they shifted their constitution (πρὶν τὰ καθεστῶτα ἐκεκίνησαν) than their enemies started gaining strength. The Saracens, who constituted a minor part of the Arabs, were inferior to the Romans for as long as the Roman state remained unchanged (*PG* 160, col. 846.D). However, when the laws of the state were modified to no other end than to extend the territory of the state and to be victorious in wars, the empires collapsed. The Arabs strengthened their position and subjected a great part of the Roman lands<sup>31</sup>, took hold of Libya and, lastly, subjugated the Persians. Simultaneously, Plethon continues, other tribes secured power for themselves because they made use of the laws. The best example can be provided by these barbarians who are much more powerful than 'us' (οἳ τὲ καθ' ἡμῶν οὗτοι μέγιστον δυνήθεντες βάρβαροι) and who, through wise usage of the laws, accomplished most spectacular successes (cf. *De Isthmo*: 310.11–18).

The noun Ῥωμαῖοι in the first *Memorandum* is, to use Gill Paige's terminology, a key content item<sup>32</sup> – a term which denotes *exclusively the Romans of the West*. Plethon consciously alters the essence of prevailing mode of Byzantine ethnic self-ascription. Roman identity with all its socio-cultural connotations is substituted by the author with Hellenic identity. The ethnonym 'Ἕλληνες' signifies in the *Memoranda* both the Ancient Greeks as well as the Byzantines – Plethon explicitly builds a link between the Greeks of the old times and contemporary Hellenes. In

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<sup>31</sup> *PG* 160, col.848.A: Ῥωμαίων ἐπικρατείας τὴν πλείστην καὶ ἀρίστην ἀπετέμοντο.

<sup>32</sup> Understood as the language terms which are the expressions of group identities as seen by the authors of the relevant texts. PAGE, 2008: 22.

the first oration (PG 160, col. 845.B–C) the term Ἕλληνες is employed first with reference to the narrative of Heracles. It was only when the mythical hero cleansed the injustice and established by his actions zeal of virtue and order that the Greeks acquired their fame. Under the lead of Heracles, the Hellenes accomplished many glorious victories over the barbarians (μεγάλαι Ἑλλήνων νῖκαι). Thereupon, Plethon mentions Lycurgus, a semi-mythical Spartan state founder, thanks to the laws which had been devised by him, Sparta had become a renowned πόλις. Once again, the narrator purposefully distorts the facts with a clear intent in his head. Roman and Hellenic identities are differentiated and interconnected through the myth of Aeneas, who, exiled from his fatherland, reached Italy, united himself with the Sabines who were of Lacedaemonian origin and gave birth to “the greatest city”.

Construction of the myth of Hellenic identity finds its climax in the second and later oration of Plethon. Just after the exordium of the speech Plethon formulates his memorable statement: Ἔσμεν γὰρ οὖν [...] Ἕλληνες τὸ γένος, ὡς τῆ φωνῆ καὶ ἡ πάτριος παιδεία μαρτυρεῖ (PG 160, col. 821.B). It is one of the most frequently quoted fragments of Gemistos’ works – many scholars see it as the beginning point of Modern Greek identity<sup>33</sup>. The author of the speeches calls both the linguistic continuity and the cultural heritage, neatly encapsulated by the term πάτριος παιδεία. The declaration itself is designed extremely subtly and artfully. It resembles Herodotus’ vision of Greekness (Her. *Hist.* 8.144.2): αὐτίς δὲ τὸ Ἑλληνικὸν ἐὼν ὁμαιμόν τε καὶ ὁμόγλωσσον καὶ θεῶν ἰδρύματά τε κοινὰ καὶ θυσίαι ἤθεά τε ὁμότροπα. In the *Histories*, just as in the *Memorandum*, the language (ὁμόγλωσσον) and the common culture (θεῶν ἰδρύματά τε κοινὰ καὶ θυσίαι

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<sup>33</sup> “Αναφέρεται, τέλος, στην ανάγκη εθνικής ομοιογένειας και προφέρει την παροιμιώδη πλέον άποψη [...]”. REINSCH, 2005: 32.

ἤθεά τε ὁμότροπα) stand as ethnic identifiers of Greekness. Hence, the aim of this refined allusion, given that Plethon knew Herodotus, must be twofold. First and foremost, it praises the Emperor's refinement and his Hellenic schooling (παιδεία). Yet, Plethon's artifice is even more ingenious: it ties the Byzantines closer to their 'true' ancestors and thereby it fulfils the basic role of the political myth. It provides significance by means of names and, as I shall argue in the subsequent paragraph, it defines direction of a political plan.

Comparable imagery can be found in the already quoted sentence from the first speech, wherein Plethon acknowledges that the Turks are the major threat to the state (PG 160, col. 844.A). The very word he uses to denote the Ottomans, Παραπαμισάδαι, was an ethnonym of ancient pedigree<sup>34</sup>. On the one hand this might be read as a mere question of radical *mimesis* and following the syntax and the *lexeis* of ancient Attic writers. I disagree with V. Hladky, who downplays the significance of use of ethnonyms by Plethon, narrowing it down to Byzantine literary custom<sup>35</sup>. In my opinion, there is far more to this peculiar use of an ancient, long-forgotten ancient ethnonym. From this vantage point, this fact fairly easily falls

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<sup>34</sup> Attested in Diodorus and Arrian: Ed. WILLIAM SMITH, 1857: 552.

<sup>35</sup> "We must not, however, overlook the context of the whole passage. Gemistos situates current events in a global historical perspective, in which they represent the long-term result of ancient Greek history. [...] It was also a widespread Byzantine custom to designate the peoples settled down and living in the territories known from the ancient historians by the names of their ancient inhabitants" (HLADKY, 2014: 13). I am firmly convinced that this is only partly true: there is much more to Gemistos' uses of ancient ethnonyms than a standard Byzantine custom, as Tudor remarks "true meaning of a myth is never its literal meaning". (TUDOR, 1972: 122). In the end, Hladky acknowledges the revolutionary spirit of Plethon's 'Hellenism' (HLADKY, 2014: 14). On a discussion of classicism of Byzantine ethnography see esp. KALDELLIS, 2013: 106ff.



into the 'nationalistic' rhetoric of the speech: the antique race of the Έλληνες is threatened by and struggles against their old and sworn enemies. In this light, the correlation of meanings and connotations of the terms Έλληνες and Παράπαμισάδαι becomes evidently strong. They both convey identical idea as Plethon's initial pun on Herodotus' signifiers of Greekness: they construct the new and reborn Hellenic identity.

This phenomenon can be better understood in the light of Kertzer's theory of "cognitive schemata": symbolic forms of discourse imbued with strong emotions lead to the narrowing of attention of the speaker and his perception of the world to simple binary opposites such as us and them, good and bad, right and wrong (FLOOD, 1996: 86). The present is understood by Plethon through the prism of the past (hence, ethno-historically, to use A.D. Smith's term): the Byzantines, the inhabitants of Peloponnese whose identity is chiefly Hellenic are threatened due to the ancient grudge which stemmed from the expedition of Alexander the Great, one of the greatest Hellenes. In order to repel this threat, the state must be reformed – and there is only *one proper way*, as Plethon perceives it, to ensure its safety.

As I have remarked, historical veracity of the political myth is not important: symbolic narrative is true as long as its speaker believe to be so. What is of interest in mythopoeic discourse is its *acting on the present*<sup>36</sup>. Political myths are "utopian insofar as they neglect the complexity of reality and the specific historical circumstances" (BOTICCI, 2007: 186). This deliberate oversight is indubitably present in Plethon's framework. While it is true that the author recognizes that the state is in utter crisis, the vocabulary of the opening of the first speech is concentrated on a re-

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<sup>36</sup> "Myths must be judged as a means of acting on the present [...]". SOREL, 1999: 116.

cently acquired safety (*PG* 160, col. 821.A: διὰ μάκρου τοῦ χρόνου τὰ ἡμέτερα ἐπανασεσωσμένων), which stands in direct opposition to the actual state of the Empire and the Despotate at the turn of the fifteenth century AD. Theodore, the Despot of Morea was either constantly waging wars, or negotiating the survival of the Despotate with the Venetians, the Turks and the Navarrese. Moreover, the local aristocracy, which was unable to be controlled with any means and which was attempting to strengthen their own power at the expense of appanage, was posing a major internal threat to the integrity of the state. These restless times, as Woodhouse has noticed, were mirrored in the actual design of the city: Mistra was a fortress within fortress, fortified against the Franks and Slavic tribes who dwelt in the vicinity (WOODHOUSE, 1986: 86). The peninsula was constantly ravaged by the Hospitalers and the Navarrese, the local aristocracy was posing a constant threat to the imperial power on the Peloponnese, while the Despot Theodore did not have enough resources at his disposal so as to effectively face the local magnates (NECIPOGLOU, 2009: 235–238).

The purported continuum of Greek language does not seem to be thoroughly valid. As Peritore has remarked, it is highly dubitable that an uneducated Byzantine was conscious of the interrelationship between language he was using and the dialect of Plato (PERITORE, 1977: 174–175)<sup>37</sup>. Diglossia was an innate property of the Medieval Greek. The learned register of Medieval Greek used archaic and outdated forms that were bound by intricate syntactic constructions which were comprehensible only to a narrow, well-educated and wealthy elite (HOLTON & MANOLESSOU, 2010: 539–543). The spoken language, which was used by all strata of the society, differed in its form, pho-

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<sup>37</sup> At the same time, he was aware of the difference of archaic form of the official Church language and the Greek he used every day.

nology, grammar, lexis and syntax (Ibid.). The proposed continuity of culture (παιδεία) is not as self-explanatory as it might look at first glance. For one, Hellenic 'outer' learning was indeed widely present in Byzantine educational curriculum and allowed as far as it did not step out of the bounds of Orthodoxy (CONSTANTINIDES, 1982: 133–158, esp. 151–158). At the same time, Byzantine *paideia* was utterly elitist and inaccessible to an average inhabitant of the empire<sup>38</sup>. Yet, it must be emphasised that Plethon's intention is to re-create Hellenic identity and to reform the state on its basis. Historical veracity of the above excerpt recedes into the background: "The myth-maker wants to incite people to action not to reconstruct the past accurately. If he or she looks at the past, it is done with the immediate intent of inciting people to action" (BOTICCI, 2007: 185).

Political myths are not always narratives: they operate with images which are closely related to political circumstances within which the mythopoeic narrative occurs (FLOOD, 1986: 106). Plethon in fact constructs a series of images which reinforce his claim to Hellenic identity and the need of reform. Peloponnese, evoked in the second *Memorandum* (PG 160, col. 821.B–824.B) serves both as such an *iconic image* and an *indexical sign*. Such a sign can be grasped as "any object associated with historical circumstances or actors can function as an index of the myth

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<sup>38</sup> „The few scores or hundreds of men who at any given time constituted the elite did form a closed caste. They have attended special schools where they had learnt ancient Greek grammar and rhetoric, and, thus equipped, were qualified to share in the *sekreta* of the imperial administration and the upper echelons of the church" (MANGO, 1981: 49–50). Also: "[...] I persist in the belief that the culture of Byzantium, i.e. the body of received doctrine and opinion that defined the outlook of a representative segment of the Byzantine public and filtered down to the ordinary folk, was dominated, not by classical antiquity, as we understand it, but by a construct of the Christian and Jewish apologists built up in the first five or six centuries A.D.". Ibid.: 57.

as a whole. [...] The sites of events which figure in myths are themselves complex indexical signs" (FLOOD, 1996: 180). It becomes a reference point for a myth. By the same token, various references and subtle literary allusions of Plethon to Plato and Hellenic myths might be perceived as such indexical signs – not only do they reinforce the constructed identity, but also they readily evoke the myth of shared ancestry in the minds of the audience.

Moreover, we must be mindful of importance of *territorialisation* within nationalist discourse: it is a *sine qua non* condition of an emerging nation: "a landless nation is a contradiction in terms" (SMITH, 2009: 149). A nation must hold a territory which is peculiar to itself only – it guarantees its security and it grounds a social group within the physical world. In addition, from the perspective of nationalist discourse and mythical narrative, the peninsula performs an additional role, namely that of an ethnoscape. An ethnoscape, according to A.D. Smith's outlook, is a land instilled with sentimental associations and cultural links. There is no other territory, Plethon affirms, which is either more familiar or more fitting to the Hellenes than Peloponnese is<sup>39</sup>. Its location is convenient by reason of its proximity both to the European continent and to the islands which surround it. The Hellenes, the author argues, have always dwelt in this land<sup>40</sup> and have never been expelled from the Peninsula<sup>41</sup>.

Territorialisation of ethnic history lends significance and essence to Hellenic identity: the Peloponnesian peninsula is the land, wherein the Hellenes accomplished the most

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<sup>39</sup> PG 160, col. 821.B Ἑλλησι δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν εὐρεῖν εἴ τις ἄλλη οἰκειότερα χώρα, οὐδὲ μᾶλλον προσήκουσα.

<sup>40</sup> PG 160, col. 824.A Ταύτην [...] τὴν χώραν Ἕλληνες ἀεὶ οἰκοῦντες.

<sup>41</sup> This claim is highly dubitable given the Slavic invasion and penetration of the peninsula in 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. Yet again – veracity is of no importance here.

splendid deeds, as we are informed (*PG* 160, col. 824.A). Furthermore, as the ethnosymbolists emphasize, an ethnoscape must necessarily be impregnated with culture of an ethnic group. Plethon's narrative conveys this idea unmistakably. Once again, the philosopher retreats to symbolic forms to strengthen the overtone of the speech. Thus, the peninsula is to be regarded as a mother (οἶον μητέρα) of Constantinople<sup>42</sup>. The city of Byzantium, as Plethon states, was founded by the Dorians, who came from Peloponnese (Δωριεῖς δὲ Πελοποννήσιοι περιφανῶς). Thereupon, the Sabines and the Aeneads, who were sent out from the Roman soil to this city, augmented the city Byzantium by large. The Sabines, on their part, had descended from the Peninsula, and were of Lacedaemonian race<sup>43</sup>.

Thus, Plethon constructs Hellenic identity very diligently – his attention to the slightest detail is astounding. In the first place, one must be mindful of the fact that Constantinople laid at the heart of Byzantine Roman ethnic identity. The Byzantine Romans, Ῥωμαῖοι, were dwelling in Ῥωμανία and their notion of the Empire was inextricably linked with the capital city of Constantinople (MAGDALINO, 2010: 43)<sup>44</sup>. Taking this into consideration, Plethon's fundamental goal is to devise such an identity which will serve as an alternative to the prevalent mode of ethnic self-ascription of the Byzantine Romans. Therefore, according to his reading, the Peloponnese is superior to Constantinople: after all, it the City was established by the Dorians. This predominance is neatly compressed in the picture of the Peninsula being “as if a mother” (οἶον τε μητέρα) of the Capital. The Sabines, who, according to the text, con-

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<sup>42</sup> *PG* 160, col. 824.A: τῆς μεγάλης ταυτησὶ πόλεως, τῆς πρὸς Βοσπόρῳ.

<sup>43</sup> *PG* 160, col. 824.B: Σαβῖνοι δὲ ἐκ Πελοποννήσου τε, καὶ Λακεδαιμόνιοι.

<sup>44</sup> For a very good survey of scholarly literature on Roman identity of the Byzantines see PARANI, 2007: 203 n.27.

tributed to the development of the capital city, were also of Peloponnesian origin. It is the Peloponnesian Peninsula which lies at very heart of Hellenic identity.

In essence, the national political myths provide answers to the questions of origins of one's community, of its heroic ancestors, of historic homeland wherein generation of their forefathers dwelt (or were expelled from), of the golden age when one's group flourished and of how the glory of the nation can be restored once and for all (SMITH, 2009: 63–68). These images are indeed forceful and capable of changing the *status quo*. Yet, they require to be strengthened by a set of 'rites' which serve to enact and actualize myths. Hence, the analysis of these 'rites', understood broadly as modes of social behaviour, or a system of social practices, will be the subject of the subsequent section. Simultaneously, I do not intend to present a deep evaluation Plethon's social engineering together with his programme of radical administrative, tax, economic and juridical reforms in a broad historical context. Reformist programme, proposed in the *Memoranda*, in *De Isthmo* and the *Nomoi* is of interest to me chiefly for the fact that it endows the constructed Hellenic identity with a concrete form and it puts a seal to Plethon's 'national' call.

## The rites of the Hellenes

A politician, in Cassirer's terms is a *homo magus*, a priest of an entirely new religion. Symbolic language is powerful in itself, nonetheless such artificially constructed system must be preserved and safeguarded: the 'social priest', "when he has to defend this religion, he proceeds very methodically" (CASSIRER, 1946: 282). Plethon's narrative of the Hellenic race is supported by the political programme of so-

cial change which can be broadly understood in terms of the already mentioned 'rites'. It comes as no surprise that Plethonean social system is based in Platonic philosophy which was appropriated to the realities of medieval society: the tripartite division of population of the Peloponnese, the economic measures aimed at autarky and the land tenure, each of them based upon σπουδαῖος νόμος have their strong roots in the ideas of Plato (SINIOSSOGLOU, 2011: 328; GARNSEY, 2007: 332–340). Although Smarnakis argues that both *Memoranda* describe different ideal societies<sup>45</sup>, I see the *Memoranda* as advocating for a uniform social programme – along with *De Isthmo* they complement rather than contradict each other. The *Address to Theodore* is focused more on the constitutional reform of the state – this is visible from the very beginning and hence it proposes tripartite division of the Peloponnesian society. On the other hand, the *Address to the Emperor Manuel*, just as *De Isthmo*, shifts balance to the areas of taxes and the reform of the army. However, both schemes do not exclude each other<sup>46</sup>.

Furthermore, the idea which in fact staples together the *Memoranda* with the *Nomoi* is ἐπανόρθωσις – res-

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<sup>45</sup> „A completely different ideal society is described in the second Memorandum” (SMARNAKIS, 2007: 107); and: “Plethon outlines a different ternary social model in his second treatise”. Ibid.: 108.

<sup>46</sup> In fact, the *Address to Theodore* mixes binary tax division with ternary social division (tripartite: PG 160, col. 849.A–B; binary: PG 160, col. 861.A; PG 160, col. 861.D). By the same token, the binary model is proposed in the second *Memorandum* addressed to Manuel: PG 160, col. 827.D–829.A and *De Isthmo* 311.3–7. Moreover, the *Address to Manuel* does mention the three social classes in the excerpt on the ternary division of agricultural products (PG 160, col. 829.B), and further in the text Plethon is explicit that the reform of the tax system and the army takes precedence over other matters (PG 160, col. 840.A). Hence, both texts advocate for tripartite social division and separation of soldiering and tax-paying duties.

toration and incitement to action<sup>47</sup>. The Hellenes, just as their country, are bound to return back to the proper order which was erroneously transformed. In the Evening Prayer to the gods (*Nomoi*, 198) we read as follows: “Now, because our life is full of errors, for just as we have been drowned in the current of fallacies (ποταμοῦ λήθης) from our earliest times, we will remain in obscurity peculiar to the mortals for the remaining part of our lives. Thus, direct us [o, Gods!], so that we might achieve the wisest understanding of the present...”<sup>48</sup> Again, in the *Address to Theodore*, Plethon calls for the restoration of the state. This land, the Peloponnese, he argues, seems best to protect the security of our state<sup>49</sup>. For this reason necessary reforms which will serve to the advantage of the state (ὡς γενομένα ἂν μάλιστα λυσιτελήσειεν) and which will restore state’s affairs (ἂ μάλιστα ἐπανορθωτέα τῶν τῆδεπραγμάτων) must be enacted (PG 160, col. 825.C). The entire political project of social, administrative, economic and legal change rests upon the idea of restoration of the proper order of *politeia*<sup>50</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> Another possible link between the *Memoranda* and the *Νόμοι* is the absence of discussion of political and social division of society in Plethon’s *opus magnum*. Hladky discerns that in the *Νόμοι* Plethon discusses only the functions of the priests (HLADKY, 2014: 162). This seems to be fully understandable if we consider the fact that socio-political reforms are fully explained in the *Memoranda* and, at the same time, religion, which is the subject of the *Νόμοι*, is the basis of Plethon’s society and the most important laws pertain to religion.

<sup>48</sup> [...] ὦν νῦν βαθεῖά τις ἡμᾶς ἔχει λήθη, διὰ τε τοῦ τῆδε παρὰ τὴν πρώτην ἡλικίαν διεξεληλυθότας ποταμοῦ λήθης, ἔν τε τῇ ἄλλῃ ἀπὸ γε τοῦ θνητοῦ τοῦδε ἀχλύϊ μένοντας· τῶν τε μελλόντων ἅμα ἔναργεστέραν πρόγνωσιν ἔξειν. English translation is mine.

<sup>49</sup> PG 160, col. 825.B: [...] πρὸς ἀσφαλείαν τε ὁμοῦ καὶ ὠφέλειαν καὶ τῆνδε τὴν χώραν πράττουσαν καλῶς.

<sup>50</sup> Correspondingly: PG 160, col. 828.B; PG 160, col. 828.D; PG 160, col. 840.A–B. The first and foremost reason of current disastrous state of being is bad constitution (κακοπολιτεία). *De Isthmo* 309.4–7: πρῶτον μὲν ὡς οὐχ οἶόν τε ἐκ τῶν καθεστώτων τὸν Ἰσθμὸν φρουρησθαι,



The conviction that the state may be brought back to its felicitous state solely on the basis of rational and purposeful reforms is thoroughly Platonic in spirit just as is his tripartite division of systems of government in the first speech: monarchy, oligarchy and democracy. His strong support of kingship<sup>51</sup> is also influenced by Platonic outlook, as Garnsey and Smarnakis point out (SMARNAKIS, 2007: 107, GARNSEY, 2007: 335), yet at the same time it is deeply rooted in the Byzantine political thought. Oligarchy cannot bring any good to the state: when the government is reduced to a few people, they will foster their own interests. Educated men of moderate fortune, moreover, seem to be the best advisors to the monarchs: they will serve the common good (PG 160, col. 848.C κοινῇ συμφέροντος). The poor tend to believe that nothing will alleviate their straits, while the rich will not do anything that does not amplify their wealth (PG 160, col. 848.D).

The three analysed texts call for a new social division of the state of the Hellenes<sup>52</sup>. In the *Address to Theodore* Plethon delineates the tripartite division of the populace. Well-thought laws (νόμοι σπουδαῖοι) will ensure that the social functions of each group will not encroach

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οὔτε Πελοπόννησον ὅλως ἔτι ὑμῖν εἶναι, ἣν βάρβαροι ἐπίωσι, τούτου δὲ ἐν τοῖς μάλιστα αἰτίαν τὴν κακοπολιτείαν εἶναι.

<sup>51</sup> PG 160, col. 848.C: παρὰ μὲν τοῖς τὰ βέλτιστα φρονουσί κρατίστον κέκριται πάντων μοναρχία συμβούλοις τοῖς ἀρίστοις χρωμένη, νόμοις τε σπουδαίοις, καὶ τούτοις κυρίως.

<sup>52</sup> The division seems to be also derived from Plato: *Laws* 848a–b: [...] νεμόμενα, καὶ ὅσα ζῶα σύμπαντα πράσιμα ἐν ἐκάστοις ἧ – τριχῆ διαίρεισθω κατὰ λόγον, ἐν μὲν μέρος τοῖς ἐλευθέροις, ἐν δὲ τοῖς τούτων οἰκέταις: τὸ δὲ τρίτον δημιουργοῖς τε καὶ πάντως τοῖς ξένοις, οἳ τέ τινες αὐτῶν μετοικούντων ὡς συνοικούντες τροφῆς ἀναγκαίου δεόμενοι, καὶ ὅσοι χρεια τινὶ πόλεως ἢ τινος ἰδιωτῶν εἰσαφικνούνται ἐκάστοτε, πάντων τῶν ἀναγκαίων ἀπονεμηθὲν τρίτον μέρος ὄνιον ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἔστω τούτου μόνον, τῶν δὲ δύο μερῶν μηδὲν ἐπάναγκες ἔστω πωλεῖν. πῶς οὖν δὴ ταῦτα ὀρθότατα νέμοιτ' ἄν; πρῶτον μὲν δῆλον ὅτι τῆ μὲν ἴσα, τῆ δ' οὐκ ἴσα νέμομεν.

on each other and will forbid the citizens to change their class (PG 160, col. 848.D). The most vital group (πρῶτον καὶ ἀναγκαιότατον μέρος καὶ γένος) is constituted, in Plethon's eyes, by those who earn for their livelihood thanks to the fruits of the earth. The consequent class comprises of artisans (δημιουργητικόν φῦλον), merchants (ἐμπορικόν φῦλον) and tradesmen (καπηλικόν φῦλον). The last and the highest group of all is the ruling class (τὸ ἀρχικόν φῦλον) with the monarch (κορυφαῖος βασιλεύς) at the very top along with the Guardians of the state: the military commanders and the judges who will look over the state and the law<sup>53</sup>. Since their sole responsibility is to rule and guard the state, they must be maintained by the taxes paid by the first class. In order that the state's harmony is preserved, the afore-mentioned groups cannot mingle with each other (PG 160, col. 849.B–C). Similarly to Plato's *Laws* and *Republic*, justice is understood by Gemistos in his *Memoranda* as doing one's own job: one cannot use donkeys to accomplish the work of cavalry horses and vice versa (PG 160, col. 861.C)

The tax system and social division will be inextricably linked: the produce should be divided into three parts, one of which will be attributed to the farmers, the second to the tradesmen and merchants; while the third to the ruling class (PG 160, col. 853.A). The best form of tax-payment is a part of one's production exacted throughout the year in small amounts (PG 160, col. 829.B–D; PG 160, col. 852.C; PG 160, col. 861.C). The *Address to Manuel* as well as *De Isthmo* supplement this framework and insist

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<sup>53</sup> This tripartite division of the state mirrors the ternary division of reality proposed later on by Plethon in the *Nómoi*, where Zeus, the King of All is placed at the very top, the second class comprises of the direct children of Zeus, removed from matter (supra-celestial divinities) and the third class includes mundane gods, who have both the body and the soul (*Nomoi* I, 5). For a discussion of this division see e.g. HLADKY, 2014: 64–66, SINOSSOGLU, 2011: 293–299.

upon the reform of the army. The populace (except from the ruling class) of the Peloponnese will be divided into two separate groups: the tax-paying farmers and the soldiers (*PG* 160, col. 828.D–830A; *PG* 160, col. 861.A–C; *De Isthmo* 311.3–7). The idea is to construct a ‘national’, not mercenary-based army. Plethon is highly critical of the idea of hiring alien soldiers for the defence of Isthmus and maintaining them by taxes (*PG* 160, col. 828.B–C; *PG* 160, col. 861.A; *De Isthmo* 310.20–311.7). The reason for such a division is trivial: it ensures that the soldiers and the farmers are not distracted from their daily duties, responsibilities of each class will not encroach on each other (*PG* 160, col. 828.D–829.B; *PG* 160, col. 828.D)<sup>54</sup>. The flat-rate tax, according to Gemistos, will resolve the issue of a disorganised administration and will equalize all the subjects in the tax-paying class. Moreover, it will expedite the reform of the army and it will provide the state with stable resources of well-trained troops prepared for the battles which guarantee country’s security and it will ensure steady flow of taxes paid in kind (*PG* 160, col. 836.A–B; *De Isthmo* 311.8–9).

Plethon’s proposal regarding property is even more extreme: private property of land will be abolished and land will become a common good – this is “the law of nature” (*PG* 160, col. 833.D). For all man wield equal right to its possession and every citizen is entitled to have as much land as they wish to. A given parcel will belong to an individual without any additional dues for as long as they

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<sup>54</sup> For Platonic inspiration of the division cf.: Plato *Rep.* 416d–e: τὰ δ’ ἐπιτήδεια, ὅσων δέονται ἄνδρες ἀθληταὶ πολέμου σώφρονές τε καὶ ἀνδρείοι, ταξαμένους παρὰ τῶν ἄλλων πολιτῶν δέχεσθαι μισθὸν τῆς φυλακῆς; Plat. *Rep.* 464c: ἀλλὰ παρὰ τῶν ἄλλων τροφήν λαμβάνοντας, μισθὸν τῆς φυλακῆς, κοινῇ πάντας ἀναλίσκειν, εἰ μέλλοιεν ὄντως φύλακες εἶναι; Plat. *Rep.* 464c: μισθὸν τῆς φυλακῆς δεχομένους εἰς ἑνιαυτὸν τὴν εἰς ταῦτα τροφήν παρὰ τῶν ἄλλων, αὐτῶν τε δεῖν καὶ τῆς ἄλλης πόλεως ἐπιμελεῖσθαι.

work on it. If the land is owned by a Helot, then he should pay one-third of his produce to the state treasury, conversely, if it is held by a soldier or a guardian, than they will have no other duties than to fulfil their proper tasks<sup>55</sup>. Among economic measures proposed by Plethon the following might be enumerated: the elimination of alien currency (*PG* 160, col. 837.A; *PG* 160, col. 853.C), the extensive use of country's resources and limitation of import (*PG* 160, col. 853.B; *PG* 160, col. 837.B), heavy control over the exchange of goods (*PG* 160, col. 837.C), the abolition of import fees (*PG* 160, col. 837.D) and high custom fees on the exports (*PG* 160, col. 837.D). A set of judicial reforms is also proposed by Plethon (*PG* 160, col. 836.C–D, *PG* 160, col. 849.B–C): it is absurd to condemn to death those guilty of worst crimes and it is barbarous to mutilate them. It will serve the common good to bid them work in chains on the reconstruction of the Isthmus' wall or wherever their assistance will be required.

Essentially, this short summary exhibits that Plethon aims at is a sound and harmonious society wherein every person knows their place in the social ladder and works for the benefit of all – such a change will require, as Siniosoglou notes, “inculcation of a new social morality” (SINIOSGLOU, 2011: 333). The author of the speeches is in-

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<sup>55</sup> This part of Plethon's speech was widely discussed in the light of its purported communism and its ultimately Platonic source. I am more inclined to follow Garnsey, who argues that the land tenure reform in the Memorandum was indeed inspired by Plato, yet at the same time Plato did not propose any universal abolition of private property in his *Republic*: the Guardians and the Auxiliaries in Platonic *politeia* cannot have any private belongings, while the lower classes are allowed to possess private items/land. Garnsey (2007) 337–338. Hladky also denies communistic feature of Plethonean proposal, yet at the same time, he sees Plato's polity in terms of communism (HLADKY, 2014: 17). Plethon read Plato's dialogues literally, a fact which is acknowledged by both Hladky and Garnsey, but Gemistos' implied communism was in fact inspired by misinterpretation of Platonic works (GARNSEY, 2007: 335–341).

deed aware that these enactments will require the overall change in the mode of life of the Peloponnesians. Their way of life and especially of the Guardians will not be sumptuous, but will be moderate (*PG* 160, col. 853.B). The country, while living humbly and with moderation, will always be prepared for the war (πρὸς δὲ τὸν πόλεμον πᾶσι τεταγμένοις). The revived state will be economically autonomous, safe and united. To be sure, these proposals are extreme and they advocate for the demolition of the social *status quo* where the depraved ruling class that lives at the expense of the underprivileged and watches over only its own interests. From Plethon's vantage point, there exists an urgent need to reconstruct the society and to demolish old, established fallacious practices. Nowhere is it more explicitly voiced than in the passages of the *Memoranda* regarding the monks and the universal religion.

Pointing to significant wealth accumulated by the monks in the Late Byzantine Empire, numerous rights assigned to ecclesiastical property<sup>56</sup> and to the already mentioned monastic takeover of the state (PAPAGIANNI, 2002: 1059–1069), Plethon addresses the entire section of his second *Memorandum* to the monks. This passage, considered in the light of mythopoeic discourse employed by Plethon, might be seen as an “ideological exemplum”, the ultimate aim of which is to “persuade its readers by its force of demonstration” (FLOOD, 1996: 128). Susan Suleiman, in her analysis of ideological novels introduced the term of “linguistic redundancy”. Simply put, they are constant repetitions of terms which “disambiguate meaning and produce coherence through mutual reinforcement” (SULEIMAN, 1980). The monks are pictured as an *internal*

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<sup>56</sup> In fact, strikingly similar anti-monastic discourse was proposed at the turn of the 14<sup>th</sup> century by Nicholas Kabasilas in his *Discourse concerning Illegal Acts* (in SINOSSOGLOU, 2011: 359). For analogous anti-monastic discourse in the twelfth century see CHONIATES *History*: 206.71–208.15 and the discussion in MAGDALINO 1981.

*enemy*: they transgress the rule according to which social groups do not mix their functions and according to which all of the members of the society contribute to the good of the state.

The monks, who regard themselves as philosophers<sup>57</sup>, contribute nothing to the state. Their parasitic standing is reinforced by the already mentioned redundancies: constant repetitions of taxes, the common good, their unsocial and ungodly character. The monks are, as a matter of fact, everything that the Hellenes must not be in their revived state. Consequently, the monks will neither pay any tax nor will they receive anything from the state (*PG* 160, col. 832.C). The taxes paid to the guardians are actually a retribution which they receive for their service rendered to the state, whereas the monks live apart from the society (ἀποστάντας), they worship their god in private and care only for their souls. No one will concede to provide them with public support, Plethon continues, unless he was under the spell of superstition, the third type of godlessness<sup>58</sup>, to think that any of their “gifts” are accepted

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<sup>57</sup> The monks are not explicitly named, but in Byzantium the verb φιλοσοφῆν was frequently used to mean ‘to be a monk’. On the shift of meaning of φιλοσοφία in Late Antiquity see HUNGER, 1981: 47–48. Hladky comments as follows: “Although Plethon does not say so expressly, the Orthodox Church of his time (the non-rational ethics, the excessive rites), or, more precisely, as in the Address to Manuel, Orthodox monks (celibacy, fasts, contempt of hygiene, refusal of money, shamelessness) may be regarded as an obvious target of his criticism”. HΛADKY, 2014: 50.

<sup>58</sup> Three types of impiety are in fact expounded at the very beginning of the Νόμοι (*Nomoi* I: 20–22) and in the Memorandum to Theodore (*PG* 160, col. 856.B–C). As Hladky remarks, they are in line with the typology of Plato which was put forward by him in the *Laws*, according to which impiety entails (1) not believing in gods; (2) believing in gods, but denying their providence (προνοία) over human affairs; (3) being convinced that the gods’ decisions can be altered by sacrifices and prayers. In HΛADKY, 2014: 52. As far as the second type is concerned, in the second book of the Νόμοι Plethon rejects the no-

by god. These monks do not even live by the rules laid down by their predecessors who bade them farm their own lands and live on the products of their own labour (PG 160, col. 832.D–834.A). The only thing they actually do is hurting the country to such an extent that would be very pleasing to its enemies (PG 160, col. 834.A). They do not even realize that if anything bad happened to the country, they would be in a worse position than they currently are (PG 160, col. 834.B). The state is almost unable to afford its own maintenance (PG 160, col. 834.C: τῶν γὰρ τοι κοινῶν πολλοῦ δεόντων), hence for what reason should it maintain this ‘swarm of drones’ (σμῆνος κηφήνων) who profess to be philosophers and demanding even higher standard of life than the officials (PG 160, col. 834.C)? They should be given free hand to farm their own land and live by their own produce – in this way, being endowed with more responsibility; they will bring more profit to the state than in the current scheme.

The image is built upon binary opposites: monks/guardians, good/bad, social/unsocial, godly/ungodly, private/common. Plethon purposefully operates with the imagery of common benefit (προσῆκον, λειτουργεῖν τῷ κοινῷ, ἀσφαλεία τῆς κοινῆς), their negative imagery is strengthened by constant repetitions (redundancies) of monks’ lack of piety (ἀσεβεία), shame (αἰσχυόμενοι ἐπὶ τῷ τοῦ πράγματος αἰσχυρῷ) and their pernicious disposition (τὸν κοινὸν ὄλεθρον, σμῆνος κηφήνων). Essentially, the passage demonstrates these social vices which will not be accepted in the new state: egoism, individualism, idleness, godlessness. By belittling, or even mocking the monks, Plethon aims to subvert the core of Byzantine

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tion of providence, substituting in with the notion of fate (εἰμαρμήνη), thereby introducing deterministic view of the universe. On discussion of Fate and its’ un-Orthodox character see SINOSSOGLU, 2011: 313–326; ΗΛΑΔΚΥ, 2014: 144–150.

status quo: “The admiration, if not veneration, in which Byzantines held the monastic life was common to all classes in society. For monasticism provided them with a model of the most perfect worldly life, that which might hope to approach the ideal – the *angelikos bios* enjoyed by the saints in heaven” (MORRIS, 1984: 112). This exhibits how deep Plethon’s social engineering is.

Nevertheless, the most important feature of Plethon’s reformist framework concerns the area of religion<sup>59</sup>. This part of social reformist framework, is a subject matter of the Νόμοι and it is not my purpose to present a thorough analysis of Gemistos’ elaborate system. A short summary should suffice to demonstrate how the constructed Hellenic identity will be supported by a set of rites. In the first oration there is already a hint to the introduction a new universalistic religion – (PG 160, col. 854.D–856.A). The most important of the laws stipulates that there is a divine nature (τὸ θεῖον) which governs all<sup>60</sup>, attends to people’s affairs and directs the entire reality according to its own judgment. It does not require humanity, its prayers and its sacrifices, hence all religious observance must be moderate and they should be just a mark of our recognition that all came from god (PG 160, col. 856.A). In other words: the rites are somewhat superfluent, nevertheless they are required to unite the Hellenic society. The greatest sins (ἀμαρτήματα) of humanity have their ultimate

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<sup>59</sup> PG 160, col. 853.D ὄνπερ κεφαλαῖον ἀπάντων περὶ τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δόξαν ἠκριβώσθαι καὶ κοινῇ καὶ ἰδίᾳ [...].

<sup>60</sup> Hladky noticed that by using the concept of some “divine nature” (τὸ θεῖον), Plethon wished to construct as universalistic outlook as it was possible in order that it might be accepted by entire humanity (HLADKY, 2014: 19). Moreover, in his Funeral Oration for the Empress Helen, Plethon presents similar outlook, purposefully devoid of any explicit references to Christianity: θεὸν μὲν τινα ἕνα τοῖς ὅλοις ἐφεστάναι, δημιουργὸν τε αὐτῶν ὄντα, καὶ παραγωγὸν, καὶ τοῦτον ἄκρως ἀγαθὸν εἶναι (PG 160, col. 955.D) and ἄκρως ἀγαθῶν ὄντα τὸν θεὸν (PG 160, col. 953.D).



source in discordances (*PG* 160, col. 856.B: κακία δὲ πᾶσα καὶ τὰ μεγάλα ἀνθρώποις ἁμαρτήματα ἀπὸ τῶν ἐναντίων γίγνεται αὐ̄ δόξων). There are, Plethon continues, various outlooks on God: some say that he does not exist, others that he exists, but is not concerned with the world, yet another people state that he does exist and his decisions can be altered by prayers. The most important fact which is universally accepted (*PG* 160, col. 856.C ὡς δοκεῖ δὲ πᾶσι καὶ Ἑλλήνων καὶ βαρβάρων) is that a man is of twofold nature: a part of which is mortal and a part divine. For as long as he acts according to the divine part and does not pursue bodily pleasures, will achieve the highest good<sup>61</sup>.

The *Memoranda* contain only preliminary remarks on the universalistic religion: the entire divine pantheon is expounded by Plethon in the *Νόμοι*: the gods who are endowed with particular names derived directly from the pagan Greek religion, but the language is figurative, they are in fact “different modes of subsistence” or “hypostaseis of a single essence” (SINIOSSOGLOU, 2011: 279)<sup>62</sup>. The gods, narrates Plethon, are numerous, yet they vary in

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<sup>61</sup> This is further reinforced by mythical *exempla* of the already mentioned Heracles, Lycurgus, Alexander and Cyrus, who followed their divine nature. Alexander son of Priam, Sardanapalos, Helen and Nero are evoked as counter-examples: all of them were lured by gold and silver which always bring destruction. Hence, the state must follow the three religious principles (*PG* 160, col. 856.D–858.D). As for the man as a composite of animal and a divine nature, similar comments are vocalized in the *In Hellenam* (*PG* 160, col. 953.B–D), on the arguments for the immortality of the soul, see *In Cleopem* (*PG* 160, col. 947.A–949.B).

<sup>62</sup> The importance of symbolism of the names in the Neoplatonic tradition is well summarized in KLITENIC, 2011: 144–148. Hladky discusses Plethon’s rejection of traditional ancient polytheism and poetic distortions of the notions of god: HLADKY, 2014: 46–47; 112. For the discussion of esoteric and Neoplatonic sources of Plethon’s religion: HANEGRAAFF, 2009: 33–49, HANEGRAAFF, 2012: 28–41, TAMBRUN, 2006: 53–24; SINIOSSOGLOU, 2011: 179–181.

the degree of their godlikeness (*Nomoi* 46: [Οἱ θεοί] εἶναί τε αὐτοὺς πλείους μὲν, οὐτοὺς αὐτοὺς δὲ θεότητι). At the very pinnacle of the hierarchy stands Zeus, the king who surpasses all other deities to the uttermost point: he is named as the highest king (*Nomoi* 92: ὁ ἀνωτάτω βασιλεύς), the eldest father of the gods (*Nomoi* 92: πατὴρ πρεσβύτατος τῶν θεῶν), the Parent of All (*Nomoi* 221: Παγγενέτωρ). Unborn (ἀγένητος), he ‘gives birth’ to other gods (*Nomoi* 46, 92, 221). The other deities, whom Zeus confers his essence to, are divided into beings of the second and the third order (*Nomoi* 46: τοὺς δ’ ἄλλους θεοὺς δευτέρους τε καὶ τρίτους θεότητι καθεστᾶναι). The gods are divided according to their divinity, value and power. The first ones are the children of Zeus himself (*Nomoi* 46: αὐτοῦ Διὸς παιδᾶς τε καὶ ἔργα). The first and the mightiest in the order is Poseidon: the other divinities are created in his image. Poseidon plays the role of a pattern for all other gods-ideas: he is the highest form (εἶδον) of all. (*Nomoi* 92: ἐαυτῷ ἀμέσῳ παραδείγματι χρώμενος γεννῶ ἄν, τοὺς δ’ ἄλλους πάντας ἄλλον ἄλλου θεοῦ τῶς ἐξ ἐαυτοῦ γεννῶ ἄν εἰκῶ). After Zeus and Poseidon there comes the order of the Olympian gods, the Titans and the gods of the mundane world. The question which Plethon yearns to answer is how the totality of reality and its complexity can be explained through a one, simple, eternal and intellectually graspable cause (Zeus). In this reading, Plethon’s Pantheon challenges the supra-rationality of Palamite system, in which the uncreated and unknowable God could be understood only through his uncreated and unqualified energies (SINIOSOGLOU, 2011: 278)<sup>63</sup>.

This religious system is further strengthened by the introduction of a new “social” calendar. Each year begins with first new moon after winter solstice (*Nomoi* 59: Ἐτην μὲν

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<sup>63</sup> Plethon’s symbolic religious system is well expounded by SINIOSOGLOU 2011: 281–292; HLADKY, 2014: 51–71; TAMBRUN, 2006: 146–172.

οὖν καὶ νέαν ἄγειν, ἣ ἂν ἡμέρα ἠλίω ἢ σελήνῃ συνιοῦσα ὑπὸ τῶν ἀστρονομίας ἐμπειροτάτων κρίνεται). The first day of each month is called νομηνία, the fifteenth διχομηνία, the last day, depending on the number of days in the month, either ἔνη or ἔνη καὶ νέα. As noticed by Anastos, in his division of month, Plethon follows the tradition of pagan scholars of the Christian era; strong influence of Aristotle is also clearly discernible (ANASTOS, 1948: 225). Each week, according to the Νόμοι, consists of seven days, the days and the months, we are informed by the scholiast, are not endowed with any particular names: they are called according to their succession: hence there is a first day of the week, the second, the third, et cetera: (*Nomoi* 61).

In the new calendar, there is a number of regular holidays, ἱερομηνία, within the month: on the first Day of each month, dedicated to Zeus, on the fifteenth Day, sacred to Poseidon and on the twenty-ninth or the thirtieth Day, consecrated to the gods of the underground. Additionally there were special holidays which were to be commenced on the evening of the 26<sup>th</sup> of December and lasted up until 28<sup>th</sup> December<sup>64</sup>. Moreover – each day is supposed to have a set schedule of rituals. There should be five daily prayers performed on regular basis (*Nomoi* 230). Every prayer will be preceded by a solemn summoning addressed to the crowds (*Nomoi* 230). Then, once the service has begun, the gathering must kneel on both knees, facing straight and raise their hand crying “Ἰλεω εἴητ’, ὦ θεοὶ” to worship the Olympian gods, then, by raising left hand only, the other gods are to be worshipped. Next, the crowd must hail Zeus, the King of all gods; this act of veneration must be led by a priest. Furthermore – every single day has a peculiar prayer (hymn) assigned to it, which is to be uttered (*Nomoi* 221–228). Recurrence, as David Kertzer

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<sup>64</sup> On the Ancient Greek origin of the ἱερομηνία see ANASTOS, 1948: 240–242.

notes is an inherent characteristic of each and every rite: ritual actions must be performed within defined space and time and they must occur often. Through this repeatability, the rituals strengthen and instil the identity of which they are symbolic expression. Moreover: they link the past, the present and the future whereby they provide a sense of continuity to their participants (KERTZER, 2010: 21).

This brief recapitulation of Plethon's calendar and liturgy does not exhaust the topic nor does it pay due respect to the intricacy of this revolutionary project. Nevertheless, it illustrates a general idea as to how radical the social change must be in order to subvert the current state of affairs. More importantly, the Νόμοι, with their theology based chiefly on Plato and Neoplatonism complete the quest of the political myth. The religious rites which control the time of an individual integrate and join the programme set forth in the *Memoranda*. They intensify reborn Hellenic identity; for as Anastos notices: "There is no aspect of Pletho's calendar [...] which does not bear the stamp of Greek influence. This is obvious not only in the astronomical presuppositions which underlie it – in the structure and character of the luni-solar year – but also in matters of details" (ANASTOS, 1948: 267–268).

## Conclusion

Together with the introduction of the rites, Plethonean social system is completed. The myth of the Hellenic race, with its starting point in the *Address to Theodore*, permeates almost the entire *oeuvre* of Plethon and it seems that Ernst Cassirer was not entirely wrong to link the rise of the political myth with the upsurge of totalitarian society: Gemistos' social vision is, from one vantage point, dangerously

oppressive. The Hellenes are free, however, paradoxically enough, this freedom is limited to obeying the sovereign and the rational part of human nature: the soul. In this light, Khazadan's term of Byzantine "individualism without freedom" was driven to extreme. To be sure, some years after, Gemistos' famous and dedicated pupil, cardinal Bessarion attempted to mitigate and 'Christianise' Plethon's call and in the letter to the emperor sent in the middle 1440's (HLADKY, 2014: 30). In reality, Plethon's proposals had never been enacted: they must have been either too utopian, or too extreme. After his death, his *Books of Laws* was cast into the flames by George Scholarios, who perceived it as a source of subversive paganism and a threat to the Orthodox teachings. Nevertheless, throughout his life Plethon remained a significant political figure in the Despotate of Mistra; his influence and fame must have been great, given the fact that he had been sent by the emperor as a laymen to the Council of Ferrara-Florence of 1438–1439 AD.

In conclusion, I should like to believe that the notion of the political myth employed within nationalist discourse sheds at least some more light on yet another shadowy area of public life of George Gemistos Plethon. As I have been arguing, it exhibits how political discourse can be used to construct potential social identities and, potentially, to incite social groups to action on the basis of their shared cultural or ethnic identity. Furthermore, the idea of political myth applied to the works of Plethon may help us to link his political, philosophical and theological writings and unite them in one uniform, yet intricate system of thought.

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## Abbreviations

- LSJ – LIDDEL H.G., SCOTT R., 1996 (revised by JONES H.S.). *Greek – English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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