

The Euro-Mediterranean Travels of Manuel II Palaiologos, Emperor of the Romans

Byzansimp

During the zenith of the Roman Empire, when the Emperor's authority was respected from Britannia to Mesopotamia, the entire Mediterranean along with large portions of the rest of Europe, it was customary for the *Imperator* to tour his vast provinces, to remind his subjects of his august power and connect with them with more intimacy. Emperor Hadrian was known to have visited almost every corner of the territory under his jurisdiction; few of his successors could have rivalled him in his extensive voyages, although a contender would be born more than 1200 years after Hadrian's death: Manuel II, of the Palaiologan imperial dynasty.

The Roman Empire that Manuel inherited was in a much different shape than that of Hadrian. More than a millennium of constant wars and conflicts have reduced Palaiologos' *imperium* to merely a handful of scattered domains around his capital Constantinople, the Despotate of the Morea in the Peloponnese and several Aegean islands by the year 1400. It was no difficult task to pay visits to these few provinces, but more impressively, Manuel II explored no less than 10 states throughout his life, all formed on the past lands of the Roman Empire. Like Hadrian, Manuel left his traces from the British Isles to Eastern Anatolia, albeit in an extremely changed world. This article seeks to present the extraordinary journeys of this extraordinary Emperor, to construct a chronological narrative of Manuel's trips and discuss his fascinating experiences.



Digital drawing of Manuel II Palaiologos, based on his miniature from the ms. su gr. 309. Author's own art.

Childhood in Constantinople

Manuel II, the second son of Emperor Ioannes V Palaiologos, was born in 1350 when his young father was still struggling for the Roman throne with Manuel's grandfather, the Emperor Ioannes VI Kantakouzenos. The prince was born in the capital, Constantinople¹, and would spend his time there as a child, learning the affairs of state and receiving his education from the brightest minds of the Empire, namely his tutor Demetrios Kydones. He remained in Constantinople until early adulthood, except during one instance: in the *History* written by his own grandfather, infant Manuel is mentioned in the entourage of his rebellious father Ioannes V while he was exiled by Kantakouzenos. From his base in Didymoteichon, Ioannes V was forced to be confined on the island of Tenedos, from where he escaped and reached safety in Thessaloniki.² Soon, Ioannes V returned to Constantinople and ousted Kantakouzenos, and 3-year-old Manuel, who had already graced 3 major sites in the Empire with his presence, was reunited with the city of his birth.

Hostage in Hungary

Manuel's next journey, taken at age 16, was a an unpleasant one. In his own writings, Manuel glosses over this, referring to it once indirectly when addressing his friend Alexios Iagoup³:

“And then, once I had passed the age of children, though before reaching manhood, a different fortune ensued with my advancing age, one filled with storm and tumults... to people who already know all these things it is superfluous to recount them.”⁴

This was the unhappy father and son trip taken by Emperor Ioannes V and Manuel to Buda, the capital of Hungary, in 1366. Ioannes V was deeply distressed by the rapid Ottoman conquests in his Balkan territories and set out to seek the military aid of the Hungarian King Louis, as part of his design to call on a Crusade from Catholic Europe against the Turks. In Antiquity, Buda was known as Aquincum, the city where Marcus Aurelius may have penned parts of his *Meditations*. Unlike his imperial predecessor, Manuel conducted no literary activity while in Buda, remaining silent on the details of this visit, so it is his tutor Demetrios Kydones who provides them: the Emperor's entourage sailed up the Black Sea and the Danube in winter and was received by the Hungarian court after a tough and dangerous time at sea.⁵ Unfortunately, the Emperor and the

¹ Barker, John W. *Manuel II Palaeologus (1391-1425); A Study in Late Byzantine Statesmanship*. Rutgers University Press, 1969, 1.

² Çelik, Siren. *Manuel II Palaiologos (1350–1425) A Byzantine Emperor in a Time of Tumult*. Cambridge University Press, 2021, 28-29.

³ Ibid, 53.

⁴ From Manuel II's own *Discourse to Iagoup*. Translation provided in Barker, 412.

⁵ Çelik, 51.

King's relationship cooled; no result came from the negotiations, and Ioannes V was forced to leave Manuel as a hostage in Louis' court to even be allowed to return home. This was a blow not only to Roman imperial prestige, but also to Manuel's juvenile innocence; when and if ever he recalled his time as a political prisoner in Pannonia, it was always with sorrow and evasion.

Manuel was home by 1367, most likely due to the presence of friendly Papal legates in Constantinople discussing the Union of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, reassuring Hungary. During one of these negotiations, Manuel, now formally having entered the world of politics, was present by his family's side.⁶

Tenure in Thessaloniki

The second son of the Emperor received the second most important city of the Empire to govern in his father's absence: while Ioannes V continued pushing for Church Union by personally submitting to the Pope in Rome in 1369, his eldest son Andronikos IV ruled in Constantinople and Manuel II in Thessaloniki. It was not his first time in this metropolis, but it was his first time overseeing it. Young as he was Manuel was already mature and dutiful enough for such a post.

The details of Ioannes V's ventures in Italy are not within the scope of our concern, but it would affect his son. By 1370, the Emperor was haggling with the Venetians in their city, and his travel funds were exhausted. Venice essentially confined him until he could repay his debts. Once more the Roman Emperor was trapped in a foreign land; and despite having been abandoned by his father as a hostage before, Manuel rushed to Ioannes V's rescue, sailing with the bail money to Venice personally, in the winter. Manuel's time of departure from Venice is unclear, but he was back in Thessaloniki in the winter of 1371. There, his grateful father issued an imperial decree granting him all lands in Macedonia that he could recover from the collapsing Serbian Empire.⁷

With this, Manuel's next travel destination was Serres, the Serbians' former Macedonian capital. After the Ottomans defeated them at the Battle of Maritsa in September 1371, Manuel's troops were able to occupy Serres in November. They then became the targets of Turkish aggression, both Serres and Thessaloniki were besieged in 1372, although neither assault succeeded.⁸

Manuel remained in his territories in Thessaloniki until his elder brother Andronikos IV rebelled.

⁶ Barker, 8.

⁷ Ibid, 10-14.

⁸ Ibid, 16-17.

Imperial Imprisonment

Frictions had always existed in the family of Palaiologos, and that between Ioannes V and Andronikos IV erupted into civil war by 1373. After the wayward son was initially put down with the aid of Ottoman Sultan Murad I, to whom Ioannes V was sworn as a vassal, the Emperor raised Manuel to be his imperial heir. 3 years later, Andronikos escaped and ousted his father and brother from the Roman throne with Ottoman help. Manuel was sent to the Prison of Anemas.⁹

As Manuel was imprisoned with both his father Ioannes and his younger brother Theodoros, with whom he shared a strong fraternal bond, the despair and anguish he felt in his days of captivity, from 1376 to 1379, were shown in full in his *Funeral Oration* commemorating Theodoros, written decades later,¹⁰ with metaphors such as “prison which was in itself indeed death”¹¹, “the jail which was almost like a tomb”¹². After a long 3 years, Manuel escaped with his family to Skoutarion, the city formerly known as Chrysopolis, then to the court of Sultan Murad, who shifted allegiance once more and decided to play kingmaker with Ioannes V.¹³ It is uncertain whether they went as far as Bursa, where the Sultan’s court was usually held, to meet Murad, but after a short stay in Ottoman territory Manuel returned to Constantinople to finish the civil war with Andronikos. In 1381, all belligerents reached an accord for peace, but Manuel was to be disinherited and Andronikos was to return as Ioannes V’s heir. Disillusioned, the golden son Manuel no longer obeyed the will of his father but departed Constantinople in secrecy to his former seat of government, Thessaloniki, in the autumn of 1382.¹⁴

Master of Macedonia

For 5 years, from 1382 to 1387, Manuel was an independent “Emperor of Macedonia and Northern Greece” essentially. His action was not approved by his father in Constantinople, who was subservient to the Ottomans, and Manuel marked his return to Thessaloniki by a string of initial military triumphs against the Turks: he relieved Serres from the invaders and scored several more victories both at land and sea.¹⁵ The locations of the later victories are unknown, but it must have been within his domains: the core territory around Thessaloniki and Serres, or in Epirus and Thessaly, where the local Serb and Greek lords submitted to his authority. Wherever

⁹ Ibid, 19-28.

¹⁰ Çelik, 66-68.

¹¹ From Manuel II’s *Funeral Oration*. Translation in Chrysostomides, J. *Manuel II Paleologus Funeral Oration on his brother Theodore*. Association for Byzantine Research, Thessaloniki, 1985, 102.

¹² Ibid, 106

¹³ Barker, 33.

¹⁴ Ibid, 41-45.

¹⁵ Ibid, 47-49.

they took place, Manuel's days of free travel in his own realm were soon over. He attracted the attention of Murad, and the Ottomans besieged Thessaloniki for 4 years.

Manuel was trapped within his city and vigorously rallied its resistance, although his subjects were less willing to aid him out of fear of Ottoman reprisal. Manuel's daily routine of exulting the citizens to contribute generously to their own defense, and to prefer death to slavery¹⁶, may be glimpsed in his grand speech, *Discourse of Counsel to the Thessalonians When They Were Besieged*, which he was quite proud of and shared with his teacher Kydones, a native of this city. Yet ultimately, none of his eloquent words managed to convince the besieged Thessalonians to continue defying the Ottomans.

In 1387, the citizens surrendered to the Turks, and Manuel, sensing his immediate demise, fled the city on April 6th. The Turks took over the second city of the Empire 3 days later,¹⁷ and he who was the sovereign of Macedonia was on the move once more, seeking refuge.

The Penitent Prince

Manuel was not welcome in Constantinople; Ioannes V was furious at his son. The Palaiologan prince first sought asylum on Lesbos, then governed by the Genoese Gattilusio family, who was given the island by Ioannes V and refused to take in his disobedient son. In frustration, Manuel and his entourage camped under the blazing sun in the rocky wilderness of Lesbos. He was at his lowest ebb, and all his bitterness about his Thessalonian misadventure were vented in his writing, the *Discourse in Letter Form to Kabasilas*.¹⁸

In time, ambassadors from Sultan Murad invited Manuel to come to his court in Bursa. Although unwilling to submit to the Turks like his father, Manuel was left with little choice, and journeyed once more into Ottoman lands. Murad pardoned Manuel for his defiance in Thessaloniki and ordered his vassal Ioannes V to receive his son in Constantinople. For a short time, Manuel returned home, but his father exiled him to the island of Lemnos as punishment. From autumn 1387 to 1389, Manuel helplessly sojourned there while major developments took place in the Balkans. With the death of Murad at the Battle of Kosovo, his son Bayezid became Sultan and quickened the pace of the Ottoman conquest of Europe.¹⁹ Manuel's quiet life on Lemnos is known only from Kydones' letters to his former pupil: literature and hunting mostly.²⁰

¹⁶ Conclusion of Manuel II's *Discourse to the Thessalonians*. Edition by Laourdas, B. *Ο συμβουλευτικός πρὸς τοὺς Θεσσαλονικεῖς τοῦ Μανουὴλ Παλαιολόγου*, Μακεδονικά 3, 1955, 302.

¹⁷ Barker, 59.

¹⁸ Ibid, 59-60.

¹⁹ Ibid, 62-67.

²⁰ Çelik, 119-120.

In 1389, Ioannes V allowed Manuel to return to Constantinople, mainly out of fear that his grandson, the son of the deceased Andronikos, Ioannes VII, who inherited his father's imperial ambitions, was to start another civil war. This was exactly what happened, and Ioannes VII besieged Constantinople with support from the Genoese and Sultan Bayezid in 1390. Manuel, returning to his role as the dutiful son, saved his father once more by sneaking out of the City and calling on the aid of the Knights Hospitallers.²¹ He stopped briefly on the island of Kos²² before arriving at the Knights' stronghold on Rhodes, the southernmost limits of his journeys. With them, Manuel succeeded in ousting his nephew from power and restoring his father to the throne in Constantinople.

Adventures in Anatolia

Bayezid failed to play kingmaker like his father, and he exacted vengeance for his humiliation by pushing the Romans to the limits of vassaldom. From 1390 to 1391, both Manuel and Ioannes VII were obliged to campaign with the Sultan in Anatolia. These two Roman Emperors joined the Ottoman army perhaps in Konya, then wintered in Bursa, where Manuel received news of Ioannes V's death.²³ It is also believed that Manuel and Ioannes VII personally partook in the Turkish conquest of Philadelphia, the last Roman city in western Asia Minor to have resisted Ottoman domination... until autumn 1390.²⁴

Whether or not the Emperors was subject to this degradation, Manuel fostered an intense distaste and distrust for Bayezid, and before waiting for his sworn lord to issue orders, Manuel took the initiative and fled back home to Constantinople on March 8th, 1391, and was formally crowned as the Roman Emperor later. But upsetting Bayezid was no wise course of action, and soon he was coerced in June into returning to Anatolia and campaigning against the Sultan's Turkish rivals on the Black Sea coast.²⁵ The Emperor's route is not clear, although it is known that the Ottoman army marched in northern Anatolia, passing Zenopolis, Pompeiopolis, with the goal of conquering Sinope.²⁶ Manuel's misery at having to help consolidate Ottoman hold in Anatolia is clearly visible in his campaign letters. In one epistle addressed to Kydones, he remarks:

“For, to see the Romans and myself, neglecting our own interests, fighting in the land of the Scythians [Tartars] against the Scythians, and serving as a commander to our own enemies—would this not puzzle any Demosthenes and deprive him of all power of speech?”²⁷

²¹ Barker, 71-77.

²² Çelik, 127.

²³ Ibid, 128-129.

²⁴ Barker, 79.

²⁵ Ibid, 82-87.

²⁶ Çelik, 131.

²⁷ From *Letter ιδ'* of Manuel II. Translation from Barker, 89.

Even more tormenting for Manuel, trained in the Classics under Kydones, was the sheer ruined state of the great Greco-Roman cities of old in Anatolia. It pained the Emperor to gaze upon the celebrated *poleis* of the Hellenistic and Early Imperial Roman age in tatters, and to add insult to injury, to have their names already lost to oblivion. In another letter to Kydones, he laments:

“But as for the plain in which I am now, it did indeed once have some name when it prospered under the Romans, while they frequented and dominated it. But now, in seeking to learn this name, it is just as if I were to seek for wings on a wolf, as they say, in the absence of someone to inform me. While it is certainly possible to see here many cities, yet, they do not include that by which cities are truly adorned, and without which they are not rightfully called cities—people. And so the majority of them lie as but a pitiable sight for those to whose ancestors they belonged as a possession in olden times. But not even the names remain to these places as a result of their previous destruction. In truth, when I asked what the cities were named, and whenever those of whom I enquired would reply that “We destroyed these places and time has destroyed their names,” forthwith was I aggrieved; but yet in silence I mourned for a while, since I was still able to be discreet. But should someone take away the names that the cities once possessed and then apply some barbarous and uncouth ones, henceforth lamenting with an outcry, I was not able to conceal my feelings, though for many reasons, as you can imagine—I all but wished to do so.”²⁸

The “pitiable sight” was Pompeiopolis. In the letter, Manuel describes its state in detail:

“Do you know of the city of Pompeios [Pompeiopolis], that beautiful, marvelous, and great city—but rather the city that once was such, for now scarcely anywhere do remains of it appear—lying on a bank of the river with a bridge of stone and once adorned with porticos marvelous in their majesty, beauty, and skill? This city, whose founder was called “Great” by the Romans, and whose own title as such was confirmed by many trophies—testified, when flourishing, no less by the monuments I have described, that he was indeed great.”²⁹

Assuredly, the trek along the Euxine coast was not a pleasant walk down the memory lane for Manuel. As Bayezid failed to subdue the Emirate of Isfendiyar, whose territory encompassed the land between Sinope and Samsun, it’s unlikely that Manuel ventured further than Samsun, which should be the absolute easternmost limit of all his travels. Then, according to a chronicler of Bayezid’s rival Kadi Burhan al-Din, the Ottoman army turned south to conquer Osmancık and Kırkdilim in the general region of Kastamon,³⁰ before crossing the Anatolian Plateau and the Haly River near Ankara to fight Burhan al-Din’s army. Then in winter the Ottomans returned to Ankara³¹ where Manuel received some respite from the endless combat by debating Christianity and Islam with a respected Ottoman theologian, the conversational basis for his famous *Dialogue with a Persian*. The *Dialogue* contains not only religious arguments, but also portrays Manuel’s life in Ankara, its relative comfort compared to the months of hardship before.

²⁸ From *Letter ις'* of Manuel II. Translation from Barker, 91.

²⁹ Ibid, 91-92.

³⁰ Zachariadou, Elizabeth A. *Manuel II Palaeologus on the strife between Bayezid I and Kadi Burhan al-Din Ahmad*, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43, 1980, 477.

³¹ Ibid, 478.

For instance, Manuel describes his shared meals with the theologian, the anonymous *müderriş*. These tender moments provide a taste of Ottoman culture and demonstrate the Emperor's cordial relationship with respectful figures of the Ottoman Empire, in stark contrast to the mutual enmity between himself and the volatile Sultan Bayezid.³² Breakfast with the *müderriş* is depicted thus:

“... Someone from among his people came in carrying wood to light a great fire. He also brought a considerable amount of nuts and honey to us – such was the hospitality of the Persians...I sat down and partook in the offering, so that I did not dishonour the hosts and distributed all remainders to those standing nearby ...”³³

And dinner thus:

“I got down from my horse and taking me by hand, the old man led me to the house, being hospitable in accordance with his customs. Torches had been lit, as well as a fire sufficient to combat the severity of winter. Near the fire, was a sizable bronze platter, full of winter fruits, adorned with bread loaves, which you recognize, those ones which are of a paper-like appearance and are badly baked ...”³⁴

Indeed, the Ottomans are not portrayed always in a positive light, as the Roman Emperor even criticizes their cooking, but Manuel describing the mild ending of his Anatolian adventures amidst discourse and good food after half a year of relentless fighting in the harsh landscapes of Northern Asia Minor is quite a satisfactory finish for these unforgettable journeys.

Besieged by Bayezid

In January 1392, Manuel was back in Constantinople, relieved to be free of Bayezid for the moment. But it wasn't long before the Sultan called on him again: the next year, Bayezid summoned all his Christian vassals to make obeisance to him in Serres.³⁵ All the Palaiologan rulers, both Emperors Manuel and Ioannes VII, along with Manuel's favorite brother Theodoros, now the Despot of Morea, assembled under their paranoid overlord, who proceeded to traumatize Manuel with terrifying conduct, which is painted vividly in the *Funeral Oration* for Theodoros: “For they [Bayezid's vassals] knew that he [Bayezid], mouth agape after the manner of Hades, was aiming to swallow them all.”³⁶ Shaken, Manuel left Serres in haste and provoked the wrath of Bayezid. The Sultan then besieged Constantinople after Manuel refused to comply with his demands any longer,³⁷ causing the Romans no small deal of hopelessness for the next 8 years.

³² Çelik, 151-155.

³³ From Manuel II's *Dialogue with a Persian*. Translation from Çelik, 152.

³⁴ Ibid, 153.

³⁵ Barker, 112-114.

³⁶ From Manuel II's *Funeral Oration*. Translation from Barker, 115.

³⁷ Barker, 120-122.

Manuel defended the Queen of Cities to the best of his abilities, and Bayezid could not bypass the millennium-old fortifications of Constantinople. Although physically blockaded in his capital, Manuel was still able to communicate with allies in the West, and participated in some degree to the organization of the 1396 Crusade of Nikopolis of King Sigismund of Hungary; unfortunately, that was a massive debacle. Not only was Constantinople not relieved, but the 100,000 European knights were routed. Despair overtook Manuel.³⁸

After this, the Emperor appealed to even more European rulers for military assistance, including France and England. The French were the first to respond: King Charles VI of France sent a survivor from Nikopolis, the highly experienced Marshal Boucicaut, with a small unit to reinforce Constantinople in 1399. The Marshal and Manuel joined forces and took the offensive, attacking Turkish possessions on the Asiatic shore, including the city of Nicomedia. But later it became clear that more help was needed, and Boucicaut recommended Manuel to visit the rulers of Western Europe in person to raise more sympathy.³⁹

Expedition to Europe

Manuel now embarked on a journey to destinations which no Roman Emperor have visited in close to a millennium. Manuel and Boucicaut departed Constantinople on 10th December 1399, entrusting its defense to his recently reconciliated nephew Emperor Ioannes VII. They set out on a Venetian galley as honored guests, stopping at the Despotate of Morea on the way to Italy, so Manuel could conduct several negotiations with the Venetians and entrust his wife and sons to his faithful brother Theodoros.⁴⁰ Thus, Manuel's statement of his own goals for the trip may be found in his *Funeral Oration*:

“But it seemed good both to me and to my advisers, and in addition to the more prudent of our allies, to betake myself to Italy, and then even to Transalpine France, and to Britain itself. It seemed reasonable, after all to persuade in person those who have the power to defend us...”⁴¹

Italy, France and England were on his itinerary; while the Romans maintained extensive contact with the peninsula which cradled their Empire, no Emperor had visited continental Europe since the Fall of Western Rome, much less the British Isles, the first province to secede from Roman authority. This Grand Tour of Western Europe taken by Manuel has received the deserved attention by historians, so the chronology is rather clear.

³⁸ Ibid, 125-136.

³⁹ Ibid, 151-163.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 167-171.

⁴¹ From Manuel II's *Funeral Oration*. Translation from Barker, 168.

The Venetian galley probably passed by Koron, and left the Peloponnese from Modon, where Manuel deposited his family, to sail straight for Venice. The Emperor arrived in April 1400.⁴²

The Venetians received their imperial guest with due respect, unlike their treatment of Manuel and Ioannes V almost 3 decades earlier when the latter was laden with debt. Emperor Manuel was housed in the palace of the Marquis of Ferrara, and 200 ducats were spent on his lavish reception. The Venetian Senate listened intently to Manuel's diplomatic pleas, made many empty promises and sent him on his way to Padua, Vicenza, Verona, and Pavia, where the rulers all made equally grand welcomes for this most revered Christian prince.⁴³

Gian Galeazzo Visconti, the formidable Duke of Milan, received the Emperor in his city. Manuel repaid the generosity by presenting his host with a piece from the Crown of Thorns, and an icon of the Virgin. However, the highlight of his stay in Milan was his reunion with his old friend, the fellow pupil of Demetrios Kydones, Manuel Chrysoloras, of Renaissance scholar fame.⁴⁴ As Italian fervor for everything Hellenic increased, the brilliant minds of the Eastern Roman Empire found opportunities to instruct their native tongue and culture in the cities of Italy. This was what Chrysoloras did, and Emperor's presence strengthened the Milanese's affection for Greek studies; although the Italians failed to offer concrete military support, Manuel succeeded in projecting Roman soft power and arousing the sympathy of the Latin Christians through his personal charisma, his regal bearing, and his perfect conduct... so much so that the Pope of Rome was inspired to issue a Papal bull on May 27th to plea for volunteers and financial contributions for a new crusade, despite never having personally acquainted with the Emperor.⁴⁵

Laden with gifts from the lords of Italy, Manuel's entourage sped towards France next, to see the King Charles VI of France. A splendid French escort saw the Emperor to their capital. Manuel arrived at Charenton, just outside Paris, on June 3, being warmly welcomed by 2000 Parisian citizens and the King of France himself. With much pomp did Charles personally greet Manuel, and the two monarchs exchanged a kiss of peace. Charles offered Manuel a royal white horse for his solemn entry into Paris, while all the Parisians admired Manuel's appearance and dignity, watching their visitor from the orient with much wonder. All of this is recorded in detail in the *Chronicle of Saint Denis*.⁴⁶ The Emperor was lodged in the Louvre, in a finely decorated chamber befitting his imperial rank, where a beautiful tapestry caught his eye. Ever so delicate with words, Manuel exclaims: "...the art of the tapestry feasts the eye and brings pleasure to the viewers. And spring is the cause: it puts sadness to flight or, if one wishes, it brings joy."⁴⁷

In Paris, Manuel appealed for help from the French nobility, just like in Italy, while his gracious host Charles guided him through the churches and monasteries of his city and invited him for

⁴² Barker, 171.

⁴³ Jugie, Martin. *Le voyage de l'empereur Manuel Paléologue en Occident (1399-1403)*. In *Échos d'Orient*, tome 15, n°95, 1912, 326.

⁴⁴ Çelik, 216-218.

⁴⁵ Barker, 172

⁴⁶ Jugie, 327-328.

⁴⁷ Peers, Glenn. *Manuel II Paleologos's Ekphrasis on a Tapestry in the Louvre: Word over Image*. In *Revue des études byzantines*, tome 61, 2003, 212.

royal hunts and gathering as well. The marriage of Louis de Bourbon and Marie, daughter of Jean de Berry on June 24th was attended by Manuel as well, as attested by the *Chronicle of Saint Denis*.⁴⁸ So delighted was Manuel by his stay in Paris that he wrote to Chrysoloras:

“Many, indeed, are the favors that have come to me from the most illustrious king, and many from those in some way related to him by birth, and not a few also from all those in authority. All of which surely bears witness to their nobility of soul and love for us and an extensive kind of zeal for the Faith.”⁴⁹

The behavior of the Frenchmen, who had sent him Boucicaut before and displayed such generosity in Paris, raised Manuel’s hopes and he began diplomatic contacts with other European states, namely the courts of Spain. He would not visit in person but dispatched his ambassadors. He did, however, journey next to England, despite her awkward relationship with France at that moment, especially after King Charles slipped into an episode of insanity in the late summer of 1400. In October, Manuel travelled to Calais to prepare for his crossing of the English Channel. The Roman Emperor arrived in Britannia two months later, first received in Canterbury on December 13th, then the English capital of London on December 21st.⁵⁰ London would be the northernmost and westernmost boundaries of Manuel’s travels.

In London, English noblemen performed a masquerade for their distinguished guest, who had the pleasure of arriving during Christmas season and proceeded to Eltham Palace to celebrate the holiday with King Henry IV, whom he describes as “the ruler of Great Britain, or one might say, the second *oikoumene*” in another epistle to Chrysoloras. The Emperor’s praise is the result of his most agreeable stay at Eltham: feasts were thrown, Henry acted as an affable host and companion, promising much, although in the end providing barely anything. Manuel resided in the house of St John at Smithfield after he left Eltham.⁵¹ Not a lot of details are known about his journey in England despite his favorable impression of it, although the English were fascinated by their guests as much as the French. Adam of Usk, a lawyer at Henry’s court, wrote extensively about the manner of the impressive Roman delegation. He exclaims:

“...how grievous it was that this great Christian prince should be driven by the Saracens from the furthest East to these furthest Western islands to seek aid against them... O God, what dost thou now, ancient glory of Rome?”⁵²

After two months in England, Manuel returned to France in February 1401. Charles, briefly restored to sanity, invited Manuel and his sacerdotal followers to partake in mass in the Abbey of Saint Denis. The Orthodox Roman Emperor and the Roman Catholic King of France celebrated their respective liturgies together in peace and amity, to the horror of certain Frenchmen; most of the others were just curious about the customs of their eastern brethren.⁵³ This time, Manuel stayed for much longer in Paris, and frequently engaged in discussions with the most learned

⁴⁸ Jugie, 328-329.

⁴⁹ From Manuel II’s *Letter λζ’*. Translation from Barker, 175.

⁵⁰ Barker, 175-178.

⁵¹ Çelik, 228-230.

⁵² Adam of Usk, *Chronicon* (ed. Thompson), 57.

⁵³ Jugie, 330.

among the French, the professors of the Sorbonne. He assisted the Franciscans in their debate against the Dominicans about the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. Being a staunch Orthodox Christian, Manuel also refuted the arguments of the doctors of the Sorbonne regarding *Filioque* and Papal Primacy.⁵⁴ The remainder of his time was occupied by writing: both for his own literary pursuits and to continue calling for aid from the other Christian rulers of Europe, although by 1402, after two years of absence from his capital, Manuel realized gradually that no one would fulfill their promise. Despair slowly set in on the Emperor; his letters to his Roman friends no longer contained such exuberant praise for the Latins and certain promises of coming military aid. By spring of 1402, Manuel was already preparing to go home.⁵⁵

The surprise deliverance of Constantinople by Bayezid's defeat at the hands of Timur/Tamerlane at the Battle of Ankara in July 1402 relieved Manuel of his responsibility to bring promised Latin help back home with him. Although his tour of Europe achieved nothing meaningful politically, he left a great impact culturally, inspiring many European literary and artistic productions and spreading Greco-Roman soft power further in the pre-Renaissance world. After it was safer to take the road, Manuel departed Paris, passing by Genoa, where his old friend Marshal Boucicaut, now governor of the city, welcomed him with a feast after his arrival on 23rd January 1403. He went to Venice on 10 February, and sailed away in April, stopping by Ragusa before coming to Modon, finally reunited with his family. Together, they were all transported by a Venetian galley to Gallipoli. Ioannes VII, the substitute Emperor, welcomed them and all entered Constantinople on 9th June. After four years, the Roman Emperor was home.⁵⁶

Guarding Greece

After the memorable European tour, Manuel, already in his fifth decade, no longer voyaged that far from home again. His later travels were all confined within the limits of his Empire, and he delegated the task of pleading with the Western rulers in person to his friend Chrysoloras. The faithful diplomat followed his Emperor's footsteps, going to Italy, France, England, and even Spain...⁵⁷ But Chrysoloras' expeditions are beyond the scope of this exploration, and we will return to Manuel, whose final journeys saw him around defending his remaining possessions in Greece, which increased after the eldest son of Bayezid, Suleiman, returned Thessaloniki, the second city of the Empire, to the Romans for an alliance.

When Despot Theodoros Palaiologos of the Morea died in 1407, his brother Manuel personally went to the Peloponnese to arrange affairs. In the summer of 1408, Manuel arrived in Morea with a Venetian escort. It is known that he visited his late brother's residence in the capital Mystra,

⁵⁴ Jugie, 331.

⁵⁵ Barker, 189-191.

⁵⁶ Çelik, 249-258.

⁵⁷ Barker, 265-267.

where he may have been inspired to compose his touching *Funeral Oration*. He also attempted to keep the quarrelsome *archontes* of the Morea in check, although it is unclear if he visited any of their domains within the Despotate. Then, having installed his second son Theodoros II as the new Despot, Manuel proceeded to Macedonia to install his third son Andronikos as the Despot of Thessaloniki, that city which he lost in his youth and restored so recently to the Empire. Finally, after relieving the Thessalonians' tax burden, the Emperor returned to Constantinople in 1409.⁵⁸

The following years, the Emperor protected his capital from the warring sons of Bayezid while simultaneously playing one against another. But soon he must journey to the Peloponnese again, sailing out on 25th July 1414. First, he must halt on the island of Thasos, where the Genoese lord Giorgio Gattilusio had designs on. Manuel personally restored order, even partaking in a siege:⁵⁹

“So you see that the citadel which you now occupy, after you seized it rebelliously, is utterly weak and not such as would resist both the machines without its gates and the continuity of the war,” wrote the Emperor to his foe Gattilusio⁶⁰. Thasos was recovered after three months.

Manuel sailed for Thessaloniki next, staying there until early 1415 to help his son Despot Andronikos and the monastic communities of Mount Athos.⁶¹ Once again navigating stormy waters, the Emperor arrived in the Peloponnese on 29th March, anchoring at the port of Kengchreai. He had come for his final grand imperial project: the restoration of the Hexamilion, that famous fortification guarding the Isthmus of Corinth since Late Antiquity, with roots as far back as during Xerxes' invasion of Greece in 480 B.C. In April, construction began under Manuel's personal supervision, and within 25 days the Hexamilion regained its former strength. Everyone, from Romans to Venetians, lauded the Emperor for his outstanding achievement... or everyone except his heavily taxed Peloponnesian subjects. The discontented Moreans revolted against their lord, and despite being extremely elderly, Manuel faced the opposition head-on, succeeding in restraining the Despotate for now. He returned to Constantinople in March 1416, having secured the Morea from insurrectionists and future Turkish attacks.⁶²

Conclusion in Constantinople

Manuel's final years were spent in the city of his birth, restlessly managing internal affairs, diplomacy and staving off the Turkish threat. The 74-year-old Emperor died on 21st July 1425 and was buried in the Pantokrator Monastery. His final journey, that of his life, had ended. So, what was the legacy of Manuel the Avid Traveler?

⁵⁸ Ibid, 275-280.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 298-299.

⁶⁰ From Manuel II's *Letter ξ'*. Translation from Barker, 299.

⁶¹ Barker, 300-301.

⁶² Ibid, 310-318.

In the former eastern provinces of the Empire in Anatolia, fallen to the various Turks, Manuel's melancholic military campaigns under his master Bayezid served only to remind him of the past days of Roman glory. All the Emperor could do was to ponder helplessly at the ruins of his civilization, that illustrious civilization which once mastered much of the known world, which he and his circle of intellectual friends discussed with the utmost admiration, in a now unfamiliar land whose citizens, in yonder days, acclaimed his imperial predecessors in Constantinople.

In all the territories directly under his jurisdiction: the scattered Thracian and Greek cities, the Despotate of Morea, the Northern Aegean and Constantinople, Manuel attempted vigorously to restore dignity and security to the Roman state, strengthening and defending them from foreign conquest. After an unchecked spiral of decline under his father Ioannes V, Manuel was the one who put a halt to it, to set the Empire on a brief revival. In what remained under the political domination of the Roman Empire, Manuel safeguarded the present of his Roman subjects.

In the former western provinces of the Ancient Empire, absent from Roman authority for almost a millennium by that point, there inhabited peoples with new names, customs, and loyalties, but who never forgot their faint connection with a once mighty Empire in those lands. The physical presence of Manuel stirred up the imaginations and interests of innumerable Latin scholars with a penchant for Greco-Roman Antiquity; here came a living reminder of that resilient civilization, a majestic Roman Emperor proudly sitting atop the summit of Greek learning. Manuel, with his humanist friends like Chrysoloras, ensured the future survival of Roman and Hellenic culture in these nations through the Renaissance, after the imminent destruction of their earthly state.

Thus, none of Manuel's journeys were taken in vain.⁶³



A map detailing Manuel's travels. Author's own art.

⁶³ I, the author, invite you, dear reader, should you develop a desire to learn more about Manuel II and his times, to visit my YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@byzansimp>, where he would be a protagonist in two of my coming videos summarizing the history of the Eastern Roman Empire. Thank you for reading to the end!

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