HISTORY of the BYZANTINE EMPIRE From DCCXVI To MLVII

BY GEORGE FINLAY

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

"I WOULD rather," said a former president of Harvard University, Professor Felton, "be the author of your histories than Prime Minister of England." This was said in a letter to Finlay, reassuring and solacing him in his day of dejection. So Atticus once comforted Cicero; but it is to be feared that Finlay's case was one of another order, less consolable. His misgivings were due to a sense of disillusion over that very cause, the renaissance of a new Greece, to which he had devoted his life with unswerving mind and singleness of purpose. And even that was not all. For his disappointment coincided with the beginning of his own physical decline, and with the apparent signs too, for so he read them, that his services to his day and generation had been in vain.

Now, we who look back along the steadfast line of his achievement, recognise how eminent it was, and how true was the prophecy of his friend Felton, uttered almost fifty years ago. We see the continuing effects of his labour, forty years long, as an historian, and the heroic difficulty of his work as an active and practical Philhellene. To gain an estimate of its force and quality, it is almost enough to read the books of his Byzantine history that follow; but they ought to be read with the radiant hope of Finlay's youth and his first great ardour in the Hellenic cause gleaming upon the page.

Finlay, who died in Athens in 1875, was born at Faversham, Kent, in 1799; that is a few months before Macaulay, a very different master of history. His early circumstances were hardly such as to foster his special qualities. He went to no university until he was twenty, and had spent some months in a writer's office at Glasgow; and of his schooldays, three years in a Liverpool boarding-school were, on his own showing, a lost and useless period.

But he was fortunate in having a mother who both loved history herself and had the art of making it alive to the imagination of her boy. When, then, Finlay went from Glasgow to Göttingen to study Roman law, he was better primed than the mere chart of his early years would seem to show. Moreover, he reached Germany at a time when the promise of the new awakening of Greece was

bright, and he breathed the air of its revolt in a kind of intellectual ecstasy. He drank in eagerly every word he could of the news of the Greek cause, made friends with the one Greek student at the college; and at length, in the autumn of 1823, very shortly after the news of Lord Byron's departure for Greece had been announced, he too set off thither. He reached Cephalonia in November, and met the poet; went on to Athens, and then to Missolonghi. Probably it was there that he, like Lord Byron, laid the seeds of the fever that afterwards seriously threatened him. It was in April, 1824, that Byron died. Finlay had gone on meanwhile to Italy, where and in Sicily he spent some time, returning to Scotland to pass his examination in civil law. But that accomplished, he felt the power and the hope of Greece all dominant in his mind. He could not resist the unsated desire he felt to return and be in the very midst of the struggle. He left again for its shores in 1825, there to remain for the rest of his life, nearly half a century in all, with the intermission only of a few visits home. In 1829 Greece was able to declare her independence—thanks to the aid of many enthusiastic adherents, who, like Byron and Finlay, had been ready to give all they had to her cause. Alas! Finlay lost nearly all he possessed, and often felt that he had given his days as well as his wealth in vain in this sacrifice.

But Finlay, if he doubted at times, and felt that all he had done and spent and written had been of no real avail, could never have echoed Byron's plaint in "Childe Harold" for the companion country:

> There is the moral of all human tales;
> 'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past,
> First Freedom, and then Glory—when that fails,
> Wealth, vice, corruption,—barbarism at last.
> And History, with all her volumes vast,
> Hath but one page! . . . .

Long afterwards, it is true, in 1855, Finlay wrote in the retrospect:—

"Had the hopes with which I joined the cause of Greece in 1823 been fulfilled, it is not probable that I should have abandoned the active duties of life, and the noble task of labouring to improve the land, for the sterile task of recording its misfortunes."

But Finlay was a philosopher in essence, if not always able to be philosophical in the common sense about the discrepancy that exists between human and ideal effort and sheer achievement. We turn back now to the record of his "sterile task"—his

writing of Greek history. Its first results appeared in 1836, when his book on the "Hellenic Kingdom and the Greek Nation," was published. Then in 1844, his "Greece under the Romans" followed in two volumes. His History of the Byzantine and Greek Empires was completed in 1854. Two years later came the volumes dealing with the Ottoman and Venetian Domination; and in 1861, his History of the Greek Revolution. If his life-work then seemed complete, he still did great service by his letters and articles contributed to the "Athenæum," the "Times," "Saturday Review," and other papers and reviews. We have seen already that his own feeling in these later years was one of much discouragement. He had seen the light of a new and regenerate Greece wax, and then wane; and the decline was a more serious one, viewed under his gravely human, philosophical estimate, than the outer world could perceive. Then his own stock of vitality was beginning to run low, and his faith in the validity of his life-work—considered purely as a literary and scholarly accomplishment and apart from the good or evil fortune of his chosen and adopted country—had been weakened, in spite of the encouragements of his peers and fellow-scholars—men like the President of Harvard and Professor Müller. Probably, living away in Athens as he did, he did not realise the full measure of his influence. But his was an order of work that could not hope to attain a great vogue. Sound and slow, without the surface brilliancy that made a Macaulay enormously popular, it has power to affect the circle of scholars and men who were the inner public of the time. It is not readily to be known, however, if this has been achieved, and, at any rate, the signs were not so deciphered by Finlay from his watch-tower at Athens.

But of the total value of his historical work there is, there can be, no question. He was the pioneer of the new movement which in England led at last to the re-writing of history with an eye to human development and social and economic change, as it was re-written for us by Green in his "History of the English People." But Finlay, long before Green, had come to the same sense of the true function of history. One passage, and a very remarkable one it is, may be quoted to show how he confronted his great task:—

"The vicissitudes which the great masses of the nations of the earth have undergone in past ages have hitherto received very little attention from historians, who have adorned their pages with the records of kings, and the personal exploits of princes and great men, or attached their narrative to the fortunes of the dominant

classes, without noticing the fate of the people. History, however, continually repeats the lesson that powers, numbers, and the highest civilisation of an aristocracy are, even when united, insufficient to ensure national prosperity, and establish the power of the rulers on so firm and permanent a basis as shall guarantee the dominant class from annihilation. . . . It is that portion only of mankind, which eats bread raised from the soil by the sweat of its brow, that can form the basis of a permanent material existence."

In this passage we have Finlay's idea of the philosophy of history, and of the historian's exemplification of it in practice. It was an idea that was present and that was most devotedly pursued to the end in Finlay's own books. The test of a man's performance in this, as in other forms of literature, is in the reading; and Finlay's readers, here and in other pages of his, will decide what his final place is in the common ground where literature and history meet.

We might have added a word from the tribute paid to him by a Greek contemporary on his death, who spoke of him as only Byron among foreigners had been spoken of previously. But more to the purpose here is that of the "Athenæum," to which he had contributed for some thirty-six years in all, at his death. In its obituary notice, it spoke of the great loss caused to history and to English literature by the death of this last of the old generation of Philhellenes who had followed Byron's lead. And the loss to Greece itself, it pointed out, was none the less, since the people needed a Mentor so much and so unwillingly endured one.

"To Finlay," continued the writer in the "Athenæum," his researches taught "the practical lesson that the regeneration of Greece was not to be sought in the reproduction of classic forms, but in the rational development of the people as they are. . . . It was with this view that he contributed to the 'Times' a remarkable series of letters from Greece . . . which appear to have produced a revolution in the Greek mind."

What, we cannot but ask, would Finlay have said had he witnessed the melancholy sequel of the last Greek war, with its exhibition of even deeper infirmities,—with evidence of a far graver disorder of state and people, than those he knew and those he anticipated?

Finlay's last publication was an edition, printed in Paris, of the journal kept by Brue, interpreter to the French embassy, who accompanied the Grand Vizier, Ali, in the Morean campaign of 1715. Finlay had purchased the MS. in 1843, and had drawn from

it freely in his "Greece under the Ottoman and Venetian Domination."

Another passage from the poet who helped to kindle and inspire his Hellenic ardour is the best epilogue both to Finlay's sanguine first hopes and his last troubled decline. It occurs in "The Siege of Corinth".—

> The waters murmured of their name;
> The woods were peopled with their fame.
> The silent pillar, lone and grey,
> Claimed kindred with their sacred clay;
> Their spirits wrapped the dusky mountain,
> Their memory sparkled o'er the fountain;
> The meanest rill, the mightiest river,
> Rolled mingling with their fame for ever.
> Despite of every yoke she bears
> That land is Glory's still and theirs!
> 'Tis still a watchword to the earth:
> When man would do a deed of worth
> He points to Greece. . . .

V. R. R.

The following is a list of the published works of George Finlay (1799–1875):—

The Hellenic Kingdom and the Greek Nation, 1836. *Remarks on the Topography of Oropia and Diacria*, 1838. Ἐπιστολη προς τους Ἀθηναιους (and other pamphlets on Greek Finance), 1844. *Greece under the Romans*, 1844. *On the Site of the Holy Sepulchre*, 1847. *Greece to its Conquest by the Turks*, 1851. *Greece under Ottoman and Venetian Dominion*, 1856. *The Greek Revolution*, 1861. Ἀντικειμενα εὑρεθεντα εν Ἑλλαδι, 1869. παρατηρησεις ἐπι της ἐν Ἑλβετιᾳ, etc., 1869. *The French Narrative of Benjamin Brue*, 1870. *A History of Greece from its Conquest by the Romans to the Present Time*, B.C. 146–A.D. 1864; 1877 [Clarendon Press reissue of his History, revised by himself, and edited by Tozer].

Finlay also contributed to the "Times" (1864–70), "Athenæum," and "Saturday Review."

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CHAPTER I

THE ISAURIAN DYNASTY. A.D. 717–797

SECTION I

CHARACTERISTICS OF BYZANTINE HISTORY—ITS DIVISIONS—EXTENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS OF THE EMPIRE

THE institutions of Imperial Rome had long thwarted the great law of man's existence which impels him to better his condition, when the accession of Leo the Isaurian to the throne of Constantinople suddenly opened a new era in the history of the Eastern Empire. Both the material and intellectual progress of society had been deliberately opposed by the imperial legislation. A spirit of conservatism persuaded the legislators of the Roman empire that its power could not decline, if each order and profession of its citizens was fixed irrevocably in the sphere of their own peculiar duties by hereditary succession. An attempt was really made to divide the population into castes. But the political laws which were adopted to maintain mankind in a state of stationary prosperity by these trammels, depopulated and impoverished the empire, and threatened to dissolve the very elements of society. The Western Empire, under their operation, fell a prey to small tribes of northern nations; the Eastern was so depopulated that it was placed on the eve of being repeopled by Sclavonian colonists, and conquered by Saracen invaders.

Leo III. mounted the throne, and under his government the empire not only ceased to decline, but even began to regain much of its early vigour. Reformed modifications of the old Roman authority developed new energy in the empire. Great political reforms, and still greater changes in the condition of the people, mark the eighth century as an epoch of transition in Roman history, though the improved condition of the mass of the population is in some degree concealed by the prominence given to the disputes concerning image-worship in the records of this period. But the increased strength of the empire, and the energy infused into the administration, are forcibly displayed by the fact, that

the Byzantine armies began from this time to oppose a firm barrier to the progress of the invaders of the empire.

When Leo III. was proclaimed Emperor, it seemed as if no human power could save Constantinople from falling as Rome had fallen. The Saracens considered the sovereignty of every land, in which any remains of Roman civilisation survived, as within their grasp. Leo, an Isaurian, and an Iconoclast, consequently a foreigner and a heretic, ascended the throne of Constantine, and arrested the victorious career of the Mohammedans. He then reorganised the whole administration so completely in accordance with the new exigencies of Eastern society, that the reformed empire outlived for many centuries every government contemporary with its establishment.

The Eastern Roman Empire, thus reformed, is called by modern historians the Byzantine Empire; and the term is well devised to mark the changes effected in the government, after the extinction of the last traces of the military monarchy of ancient Rome. The social condition of the inhabitants of the Eastern Empire had already undergone a considerable change during the century which elapsed from the accession of Heraclius to that of Leo, from the influence of causes to be noticed in the following pages; and this change in society created a new phase in the Roman empire. The gradual progress of this change has led some writers to date the commencement of the Byzantine Empire as early as the reigns of Zeno and Anastasius, and others to descend so late as the times of Maurice and Heraclius.[1] But as the Byzantine Empire was only a continuation of the Roman government under a reformed system, it seems most correct to date its commencement from the period when the new social and political modifications produced a visible effect on the fate of the Eastern Empire. This period is marked by the accession of Leo the Isaurian.

The administrative system of Rome, as modified by Constantine, continued in operation, though subjected to frequent reforms, until Constantinople was stormed by the Crusaders, and the Greek church enslaved by papal domination. The

1 Clinton, *Fasti Romani*, Int. xiii. says, "The empire of Rome, properly so called, ends at A.D. 476," which is the third year of Zeno. Numismatists place the commencement of the Byzantine empire in the reign of Anastasius I.—Saulcy, *Essai de Classification des Suites Monétaires Byzantines*. Gibbon tells us, "Tiberius by the Arabs, and Maurice by the Italians, are distinguished as the first of the Greek Cæsars, as the founders of a new dynasty and empire. The silent revolution was accomplished before the death of Heraclius."—*Decline and Fall*, vol. x. chap. liii. p. 154.

General Council of Nicæa, and the dedication of the imperial city, with their concomitant legislative, administrative, and judicial institutions, engendered a succession of political measures, whose direct relations were uninterrupted until terminated by foreign conquest. The government of Great Britain has undergone greater changes during the last three centuries than that of the Eastern Empire during the nine centuries which elapsed from the foundation of Constantinople in 330, to its conquest in 1204.

Yet Leo III. has strong claims to be regarded as the first of a new series of emperors. He was the founder of a dynasty, the saviour of Constantinople, and the reformer of the church and state. He was the first Christian sovereign who arrested the torrent of Mohammedan conquest; he improved the condition of his subjects; he attempted to purify their religion from the superstitious reminiscences of Hellenism, with which it was still debased, and to stop the development of a quasi-idolatry in the orthodox church. Nothing can prove more decidedly the right of his empire to assume a new name than the contrast presented by the condition of its inhabitants to that of the subjects of the preceding dynasty. Under the successors of Heraclius, the Roman Empire presents the spectacle of a declining society, and its thinly-peopled provinces were exposed to the intrusion of foreign colonists and hostile invaders. But, under Leo, society offers an aspect of improvement and prosperity; the old population revives from its lethargy, and soon increases, both in number and strength, to such a degree as to drive back all intruders on its territories. In the records of human civilisation, Leo the Isaurian must always occupy a high position, as a type of what the central power in a state can effect even in a declining empire.

Before reviewing the history of Leo's reign, and recording his brilliant exploits, it is necessary to sketch the condition to which the Roman administrative system had reduced the empire. It would be an instructive lesson to trace the progress of the moral and mental decline of the Greeks, from the age of Plato and Aristotle to the time of the sixth ecumenical council, in the reign of Justinian II.; for the moral evils nourished in Greek society degraded the nation, before the oppressive government of the Romans impoverished and depopulated Greece. When the imperial authority was fully established, we easily trace the manner in which the inter-

communication of different provinces and orders of society became gradually restricted to the operations of material interests, and how the limitation of ideas arose from this want of communication, until at length civilisation decayed. Good roads and commodious passage-boats have a more direct connection with the development of popular education, as we see it reflected in the works of Phidias and the writings of Sophocles, than is generally believed. Under the jealous system of the imperial government, the isolation of place and class became so complete, that even the highest members of the aristocracy received their ideas from the inferior domestics with whom they habitually associated in their own households —not from the transitory intercourse they held with able and experienced men of their own class, or with philosophic and religious teachers. Nurses and slaves implanted their ignorant superstitions in the households where the rulers of the empire and the provinces were reared; and no public assemblies existed, where discussion could efface such prejudices. Family education became a more influential feature in society than public instruction; and though family education, from the fourth to the seventh century, appears to have improved the morality of the population, it certainly increased their superstition and limited their understandings. Emperors, senators, landlords, and merchants, were alike educated under these influences; and though the church and the law opened a more enlarged circle of ideas, from creating a deeper sense of responsibility, still the prejudices of early education circumscribed the sense of duty more and more in each successive generation. The military class, which was the most powerful in society, consisted almost entirely of mere barbarians. The mental degradation, resulting from superstition, bigotry, and ignorance, which forms the marked social feature of the period between the reigns of Justinian I. and Leo III., brought the Eastern Empire to the state of depopulation and weakness that had delivered the Western a prey to small tribes of invaders.

The fiscal causes of the depopulation of the Roman empire have been noticed in a prior volume, as well as the extent to which immigrants had intruded themselves on the soil of Greece.[1] The corruption of the ancient language took place at the same time, and arose out of the causes which disseminated ignorance. At the accession of Leo, the disorder in

[1] *Greece under the Romans*, 60, 70, 238.

the central administration, the anarchy in the provincial government, and the ravages of the Sclavonians and Saracens, had rendered the condition of the people intolerable. The Roman government seemed incapable of upholding legal order in society, and its extinction was regarded as a proximate event.[1] All the provinces between the shores of the Adriatic and the banks of the Danube had been abandoned to Sclavonian tribes. Powerful colonies of Sclavonians had been planted by Justinian II. in Macedonia and Bithynia, in the rich valleys of the Strymon and the Artanas.[2] Greece was filled with pastoral and agricultural hordes of the same race, who became in many districts the sole cultivators of the soil, and effaced the memory of the names of mountains and streams, which will be immortal in the world's literature.[3] The Bulgarians plundered all Thrace to the walls of Constantinople.[4] Thessalonica was repeatedly besieged by Sclavonians.[5] The Saracens had inundated Asia Minor with their armies, and were preparing to extirpate Christianity in the East. Such was the crisis at which Leo was proclaimed emperor by the army, in Amorium A.D. 716.

Yet there were peculiar features in the condition of the surviving population, and an inherent vigour in the principles of the Roman administration, that still operated powerfully in resisting foreign domination. The people felt the necessity of defending the administration of the law, and of upholding commercial intercourse. The ties of interest consequently ranged a large body of the inhabitants of every province round the central administration at this hour of difficulty. The very circumstances which weakened the power of the court of Constantinople, conferred on the people an increase of authority, and enabled them to take effectual measures for their own defence. This new energy may be traced in the resistance which Ravenna and Cherson offered to the tyranny of Justinian II. The orthodox church, also, served as an additional bond of union among the people, and, throughout the wide extent

[1] This feeling can be traced as early as the reign of Maurice. Theophylactus Simocatta records that an angel appeared in a dream to the Emperor Tiberius II., and uttered these words: "The Lord announces to thee, O emperor, that in thy reign the days of anarchy shall not commence."—P. 11, edit. Par.

[2] Constant. Porphyr., *De Them.* ii. 23, edit. Band. Theophanes, 304, 305, 364. Nicephorus, P. C. 44, edit. Par.

[3] Constant. Porphyr., *De Them.* ii. 25. Strabonis Epit. tom. iii. 386, edit. Coray.

> "Their place of birth alone is mute
> To sounds which echo farther west,
> Than their sires' islands of the blest."

[4] Theophanes, 320.

[5] Tafel, *De Thessalonica ejusque Agro*, prol. xciv.

of the imperial dominions, its influences connected the local feelings of the parish with the general interests of the church and the empire. These misfortunes, which brought the state to the verge of ruin, relieved commerce from much fiscal oppression and many monopolies. Facilities were thus given to trade, which afforded to the population of the towns additional sources of employment. The commerce of the Eastern Empire had already gained by the conquests of the barbarians in the West, for the ruling classes in the countries conquered by the Goths and Franks rarely engaged in trade or accumulated capital.[1] The advantage of possessing a systematic administration of justice, enforced by a fixed legal procedure, attached the commercial classes and the town population to the person of the emperor, whose authority was considered the fountain of legal order and judicial impartiality. A fixed legislation, and an uninterrupted administration of justice, prevented the political anarchy that prevailed under the successors of Heraclius from ruining society in the Roman empire; while the arbitrary judicial power of provincial governors, in the dominions of the caliphs, rendered property insecure, and undermined national wealth.

There was likewise another feature in the Eastern Empire which deserves notice. The number of towns was very great, and they were generally more populous than the political state of the country would lead us to expect. Indeed, to estimate the density of the urban population, in comparison with the extent of territory from which it apparently derived its supplies, we must compare it with the actual condition of Malta and Guernsey, or with the state of Lombardy and Tuscany in the middle ages. This density of population, joined to the great difference in the price of the produce of the soil in various places, afforded the Roman government the power of collecting from its subjects an amount of taxation unparalleled in modern times, except in Egypt.[2] The whole surplus profits

[1] This fact explains the increase in the numbers of the Jews, and their commercial importance, in the seventh century. The conquered Romans were bound to their corporations by their own law, to which they clung, and almost to the trades of their fathers; for the Romans were serfs of their corporations before serfdom was extended by their conquerors to the soil. Compare *Cod. Theodos.* lib. x. t. 20, l. 10, with *Cod. Justin.* lib. xi. t. 8, and lib. xi. x. 3. One of the three ambassadors sent by Charlemagne to Haroun Al Rashid was a Jew. He was doubtless charged with the commercial business.

[2] The peculiarities in Egypt, which enabled the government of Mehemet Ali to extract about two millions sterling annually from a population of two millions of paupers, were the following: The surplus in the produce of the country makes the price of the immense quantity produced in Upper Egypt very low. Government can, consequently, either impose a tax on the produce of the upper country equal to the

of society were annually drawn into the coffers of the state, leaving the inhabitants only a bare sufficiency for perpetuating the race of tax-payers. History, indeed, shows that the agricultural classes, from the labourer to the landlord, were unable to retain possession of the savings required to replace that depreciation which time is constantly producing in all vested capital, and that their numbers gradually diminished.

After the accession of Leo III., a new condition of society is soon apparent; and though many old political evils continued to exist, it becomes evident that a greater degree of personal liberty, as well as greater security for property, was henceforth guaranteed to the mass of the inhabitants of the empire. Indeed, no other government of which history has preserved the records, unless it be that of China, has secured equal advantages to its subjects for so long a period. The empires of the caliphs and of Charlemagne, though historians have celebrated their praises loudly, cannot, in their best days, compete with the administration organised by Leo on this point; and both sank into ruin while the Byzantine empire continued to flourish in full vigour. It must be confessed that eminent historians present a totally different picture of Byzantine history to their readers. Voltaire speaks of it as a worthless repertory of declamation and miracles, disgraceful to the human mind.[1] Even the sagacious Gibbon, after enumerating with just pride the extent of his labours, adds, "From these considerations, I should have abandoned without regret the Greek slaves and their servile historians, had I not reflected that the fate of the Byzantine monarchy is passively connected with the most splendid and important revolutions which have changed the state of the world."[2] The views of Byzantine history, unfolded in the following pages, are frequently

difference of price at Siout and Alexandria, less the expense of transport, or it can constitute itself the sole master of the transport on the Nile, and make a monopoly both of the right of purchase and of freight. The expense of transport is trifling, as the stream carries a loaded boat steadily down the river, while the north wind drives an empty one up against the current, almost with the regularity of a locomotive engine. The Nile offers, in this manner, all the advantages of a railway, nature having constructed the road, and supplied the locomotive power; while a monopoly of their use is vested in the hands of every tyrant who rules the country. Mehemet Ali, not content with this, created an almost universal monopoly in favour of his government. The whole produce of the country was purchased at a tariff price, the cultivator being only allowed to retain the means of perpetuating his class. The number of towns and the density of population in the Byzantine empire arose from the immense amount of capital which ages of security had expended in improving the soil, and from its cultivation as garden-land with the spade and mattock. Both these facts are easily proved.

[1] *Le Pyrrhonisme de l'Histoire*, chap. xv. note l. With this remark, the records of an empire, which witnessed the rise and fall of the Caliphs and the Carlovingians, are dismissed by one who exclaimed, "*J'ôterai aux nations le bandeau de l'erreur.*"

[2] *Decline and Fall*, chap. xlviii.