

Tarih & Gelecek Dergisi

Journal of History & Future



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Başvuruda bulundu. Kabul edildi.
Applied Accepted

Eser Geçmişi / Article Past: 04/07/2025 28/08/2025

Araştırma Makalesi

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21551/jhf.1735115>

Research Paper

Orjinal Makale / Original Paper

Local Identity and Political Belonging in Ioannina in the 13th–14th Centuries

13.-14. Yüzyıllarda Yanya'da Yerel Kimlik ve Politik Aidiyet

ATIF: GÜLTEKİN, Yasemin, "13.-14. Yüzyıllarda Yanya'da Yerel Kimlik ve Politik Aidiyet", *Tarih ve Gelecek Dergisi*, 11/3 (Eylül 2025), s. (607-623).

CITE: GÜLTEKİN, Yasemin, "Local Identity and Political Belonging in Ioannina in the 13th–14th Centuries", *Journal of History and Future*, 11/3 (September 2025), pp. (607-623).



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Abstract

This study examines the interaction between Romanitas and regional forms of belonging within the historical context of identity construction in the Byzantine Empire, using the example of Ioannina as an analytical framework. The main objective of the research is to reveal the transformation of the institutionalised discourse of Romanitas in Ioannina in a multidimensional manner, particularly in the context of refugee movements in the Epirus region and historical turning points such as the Battle of Achelous in 1359, in line with the Byzantine Empire's integrative policies. Methodologically, contemporary chronicle texts that constitute the dominant historical narratives of the period were evaluated using systematic content analysis methods; the data obtained were contextualised from a historical-comparative analysis perspective. The findings reveal that the conception of Romanitas, reproduced at the intersection of the Orthodox belief system and Hellenophone linguistic identity, shaped the formation of social consciousness not only at the religious and cultural levels, but also through institutional structures and normative legal understanding. In conclusion, this study sheds light on the regional variations of the Byzantine identity paradigm and offers an original historical analysis that re-evaluates the relationship between Romanitas and local identity in the case of Ioannina, thereby proposing a conceptual re-reading that contributes to the Byzantine identity literature in a micro-historical context.

Key Words: Battle of Achelous, Epirus, Ioannina, Patris, Romanitas

Öz

Bu çalışma, Bizans İmparatorluğu'nda kimlik inşasının tarihsel bağlamında Romanitas ile bölgesel aidiyet biçimleri arasındaki etkileşimi, analitik bir çerçeve olarak Yanya örneğini kullanarak incelemektedir. Araştırmanın temel amacı, özellikle Epir bölgesindeki mülteci hareketleri ve 1359'daki Achelous Muharebesi gibi tarihsel dönüm noktaları bağlamında, Bizans İmparatorluğu'nun bütünleştirici politikaları doğrultusunda, Yanya'da kurumsallaşmış Romanitas söyleminin çok boyutlu bir şekilde dönüşümünü ortaya koymaktır. Metodolojik olarak, dönemin baskın tarihsel anlatılarını oluşturan çağdaş kronik metinler sistematik içerik analizi yöntemleri kullanılarak değerlendirilmiş; elde edilen veriler tarihsel-karşılaştırmalı analiz perspektifinden bağlamlandırılmıştır. Bulgular, Ortodoks inanç sistemi ile Hellenofon dilsel kimliğinin kesiştiği noktada yeniden üretilen Romanitas anlayışının, yalnızca dini ve kültürel düzeylerde değil, aynı zamanda kurumsal yapılar ve normatif yasal anlayış aracılığıyla da toplumsal bilincin oluşumunu şekillendirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuç olarak bu çalışma, Bizans kimlik paradigmasının bölgesel farklılıklarına ışık tutmakta ve Romanitas ile yerel kimlik arasındaki ilişkiyi Yanya örneğinde yeniden değerlendiren özgün bir tarihsel analiz sunmakta, böylece mikro-tarihsel bağlamda Bizans kimlik literatürüne katkıda bulunacak kavramsal bir yeniden okuma önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Achelous Savaşı, Epirüs, Patris, Romanitas, Yanya

1. Introduction

In recent years, the interaction between local identity construction and political affiliation has become increasingly important in post-Byzantine identity studies. The Epirus/Ioannina region served as a unique laboratory between the 3rd and 14th centuries, both in terms of Byzantine central authority and population movements. During this period, the concept of 'Ioannina identity' evolved beyond a mere geographical definition, beginning to form a new sense of community at the intersection of central and provincial affiliations. The region's strategic location and the population waves that followed the Crusades, local autonomy struggles, and ethnic diversity dynamics are critical to understanding the historical transformation of the concept of Ioannina identity.

While the political and ethnic dimensions of Roman identity are examined separately in the existing literature, the transition processes between local and central identities in the case of Epirus/Ioannina have not been sufficiently studied. In particular, the rupture that began with the collapse of Byzantium after 1204 leaves a gap in our understanding of how the concept of Ioannina identity diverged from Roman identity and the mechanisms through which regional identity gained strength. This gap makes it difficult to comprehensively understand the identity strategies developed by the Ioannina people in response to both internal and external factors.

Contemporary historiography mostly associates local identity phenomena with archaeological or sociological data, while studies based on textual analysis and historical interpretation are limited. In particular, the Chronicle of Ioannina stands out as a fundamental source showing the evolution of Ioannina identity consciousness through the terms used after the Battle of Achelous in 1359. Studies conducted in the modern period have emphasised the role of aristocratic structures and refugee policies in the construction of identity in the region; however, these studies do not fully shed light on the unique dynamics of the concept of Ioannina identity in the post-Byzantine political process.

This study aims to reveal how the concept of Ioannina identity became a sign of political and ethnic division in Epirus/Ioannina in the 13th–14th centuries. The research question is formulated as follows: "How can the emergence of Ioannina identity as an alternative community consciousness to Roman identity be explained?"

The study will be conducted primarily through a textual analysis and historical interpretation-based approach. The use of terms in written sources from the period, particularly the Chronicle of Ioannina, will be systematically examined; identity discourses will be evaluated comparatively in the context of regional political documents and decrees.

This research aims to address the textual analysis gap in the literature by comprehensively examining the concept of Ioannina identity in both its political and social dimensions. By clarifying the impact of the local identity language on the post-Byzantine political structure in the example of Epirus/Ioannina, it will bring a new perspective to identity studies.

2. Romanitas

Citizenship in the Byzantine Empire was not the monopoly of a particular ethnic or geographical group. All free individuals were considered citizens; therefore, political rights

were not a privilege exclusive to Greeks, in the modern sense of the term, simply because they identified with their ‘Roman’ identity. However, this situation emerged as a result of a specific integration process, and it is known that practices such as marrying war prisoners to Roman women to integrate them into society were also part of this process.¹ Such integration policies enabled the Empire to increase its military manpower. Furthermore, the fact that no particular aristocratic class dominated the Byzantine bureaucracy for a long period of time contributed to the success of this process. Therefore, being an Orthodox Christian, regardless of ethnic group (which would later lead to the adoption of Greek), was sufficient to be considered Byzantine.²

The Byzantines are generally referred to as ‘Romans’ in contemporary sources. This is because Constantinople was seen as a continuation of the Roman Empire and accepted as the ‘Second Rome.’ Therefore, the people who were affiliated with this city and empire also identified themselves as Romans. However, over time, the identity of ‘Roman’ began to carry not only a political affiliation but also an ethnic meaning. These two meanings were not independent of each other but rather complementary. As a result of this development, especially after the fall of Constantinople following the Fourth Crusade, Byzantine writers began to use the term *Hellēn* (“Hellenic”) alongside the concept of *Rhōmaîos* (“Roman”).³ This situation can be seen as a sign of a historical transformation in identity definitions.

However, with the reconquest of Constantinople by the Empire of Nicaea in 1261, the alienation experienced in Byzantine identity largely disappeared. In fact, this alienation was limited in intensity from the outset, as the Empire of Nicaea and other Byzantine successor political structures defined their legitimacy through the goal of reconquering Constantinople.

However, despite the Empire of Nicaea's conquest of Constantinople in 1261 and its efforts to regain control of the former Byzantine territories in the Balkans prior to that, it largely failed to establish lasting and effective rule in these regions. One of the regions where the Empire of Nicaea struggled most to establish political and military control was the Despotate of Epirus. Although the ethnic composition of the Epirus region prior to the Crusades is not fully known, the region was part of the First Bulgarian Empire in the 9th and 10th centuries.⁴ Although 13th-century written sources mention a Slavic or ‘Bulgarian’

1 John Haldon, ‘Military Service, Military Lands, and the Status of Soldiers: Current Problems and Interpretations’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 47 (1993): 53, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1291670>.

2 For more detailed information see: Anthony Kaldellis, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

3 Although the twelfth century is defined as an era of Hellenism in Byzantium, the Hellenism phenomenon was not adopted as a part of the collective identity because it was identified with paganism for a long time. However, with the increasing influence of the Latins who saw themselves as part of Rome, the process of internalizing Hellenism also accelerated. This tendency became even more evident especially after the capture of Constantinople by the Latins in 1204. Indeed, Niketas Choniates, who was among the intellectuals who took refuge in Nicaea after the fall of the city, continued to emphasize *Romanitas*, but compared to contemporary writers, he referred to Hellenism much more strongly. Gill Page, *Being Byzantine: Greek Identity before the Ottomans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 65–66.

4 Around 930, the Theme of Nicopolis was severely plundered by devastating Bulgarian forces, and despite the efforts of the Byzantine Empire to regain control of these areas in the following years, some strategic areas remained under prolonged Bulgarian occupation. The northernmost parts of Epirus in particular

population in Arta, the capital of the Despotate of Epirus, it is noted that by 1204 these groups had largely assimilated into the Greek population. Slavs who settled in the region between the 7th and 10th centuries gradually became Hellenised from the end of the 10th century onwards.⁵ Although its scope cannot be determined with certainty, it is understood that it was spoken by various ethnic groups other than the Slavs, such as the Vlachs.⁶ A similar situation applies to Ioannina, which would later become the capital of Epirus.

The occupation of Byzantine territories by the Crusaders as a result of the Fourth Crusade led to a large number of refugees seeking shelter in the Epirus region. Considering that the Crusaders captured areas with a particularly high Greek population, it can be said that this group of refugees was largely of Greek origin. The Byzantine successor state established in Epirus saw itself as the legitimate continuation of the Byzantine Empire and openly embraced the goal of recapturing Constantinople. In this context, the founder of the state, Michael Komnenos Doukas, granted the refugees settlement and full citizenship rights, and carried out the settlements in Ioannina rather than Arta.⁷

Apart from the claim of Byzantine continuity, these new refugees had the potential to contribute to the organisation of the newly established state and the strengthening of its army. However, these policies were not accepted by the local Roman population. When Michael's brother Theodore was defeated and taken prisoner by the Bulgarians in 1230, the inhabitants tried to expel the refugees.⁸ In addition, local residents have threatened to dig up the graves of refugees buried in the area and remove their remains.⁹ However, the local people of Ioannina did not get what they wanted, as Michael's son Michael II came to power and continued his father's general policy.

For a long time, there were no large-scale migrations of Greek-speaking communities of the Orthodox faith. However, the wave of migration that followed the Fourth Crusade resembles a similar movement that took place approximately six hundred years ago, when the Arabs conquered regions of vital importance to Byzantium, such as Syria and Egypt.

appear to have remained under continuous Bulgarian rule during this period. However, with the shift of the centre of gravity of Bulgarian political and military power to the south and west, especially to Ohrid, during the reign of Tsar Samuel, a large part of Epirus, probably extending as far as the Ambracian Gulf, came under Bulgarian control. This process suggests that, beyond merely temporary occupations, the Byzantine-Bulgarian balance of power in the region had changed significantly, and that the influence of the Bulgarian state under Samuel in Epirus could have been permanent. Peter Soustal and Johannes Koder, *Nikopolis Und Kephallēnia*, Tabula Imperii Byzantini 3 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1981), 54–55.

5 Myrto Veikou, *Byzantine Epirus: A Topography of Transformation: Settlements of the Seventh-Twelfth Centuries in Southern Epirus and Aetoloacarnania, Greece*, The Medieval Mediterranean : Peoples, Economies and Cultures, 400-1500 95 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012), 42.

6 Veikou, 44.

7 Kōnstantinos Barzós, *Ē Genealogía Tōn Komnēnōn*, vol. 2, Vyzantina Keimena Kai Meletai; 20ß; 20b (Thessalonikī: Kéntro Vyzantinōn Ereunōn, 1984), 688.

8 K. Lambropoulos, *Ιωάννης Απόκαυκος. Συμβολή Στην Έρευνα Του Βίου Και Του Συγγραφικού Έργου Του [Ioánnis Apókafkos. Symvolí Stin Erevna Tou Viou Kai Tou Syngrafikou Érgou Tou]* (Athens: n.p., 1988), 298–99.

9 Donald MacGillivray Nicol, 'Refugees, Mixed Population and Local Patriotism in Epiros and Western Macedonia after the Fourth Crusade', in *Studies in Late Byzantine History*, 1976, 21.

During that period, the migration of Syrian and Palestinian refugees, who could be identified as Roman, to Byzantine-controlled Anatolia did not result in difficulties similar to those experienced in Ioannina. Thanks to their shared language and religion, these refugees were generally accepted as ‘brothers in faith’ by the local population and were largely integrated into the social structure. According to sources, the Byzantine Empire implemented planned resettlement policies in cities and rural areas to manage this influx of refugees; the church and local administrators played decisive roles in the implementation of the process.¹⁰

This situation underwent a marked change in the Byzantine Empire of the thirteenth century. From the tenth century onwards, although in a different way from the examples in the West, local-based feelings of belonging became more visible with the rise of aristocratic structures. In particular, the concept of *genos*, which emphasised ethnic meaning, began to take shape in the countryside by expanding to include family meaning, paving the way for local identities and regional allegiances to come to the fore. This trend can be clearly seen during civil wars, as the fundamental factor determining an individual's loyalty was often their *patris*, or homeland. Indeed, the fact that a soldier from Cappadocia was willing to enlist under the command of a general from his own region, even at the cost of fighting against the imperial army, reflects this local understanding of loyalty.¹¹

However, another important factor that accelerated the separation of the local from the central authority was the increasing tax burden. In particular, the increasing severity of taxation in the twelfth century led to a clear separation between local communities and the central authority even before the fall of Constantinople. It can even be argued that the rural population adopted a distant attitude towards the capital. Indeed, Niketas Choniates explicitly lamented the indifference shown by the rural population of Asia Minor towards the suffering inhabitants of Constantinople following the Latin occupation of the capital.¹²

Although Roman identity continued to exist, it now manifested itself intertwined with local identities. As can be seen in the example of Epirus, although the discourse on Roman identity continued, the fall of Constantinople in 1204, influenced by the transformation process that had already begun, constituted a turning point that deeply shook this understanding. In this context, the attitude of the people of Ioannina was not merely a cultural preference but was directly linked to the collapse of central authority and the increasing autonomy of cities.

The source of autonomy lay in the development of self-government models by cities during periods of weak central authority. This situation was particularly evident in regions

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- 10 Panagiotis Theodoropoulos, ‘The Migration of Syrian and Palestinian Populations in the 7th Century: Movement of Individuals and Groups in the Mediterranean’, in *Migration Histories of the Medieval Afroeurasian Transition Zone* (BRILL, 2020), 277, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004425613>.
 - 11 Nathan Leidholm, *Elite Byzantine Kinship, ca. 950-1204: Blood Reputation, and the Genos* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 133; A. N. Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 437–44. However, although local affiliations referred to new forms of identity, these identities were not based on ethnic references such as *genos* or *ethos*. Indeed, the expression ‘Ethnos of the Cappadocians’ (in Greek: *ἔθνος τῶν Καππαδοκῶν*), which occurs in many Byzantine texts, was technically used as a term referring to the province of Cappadocia, not an ethnic community.
 - 12 Niketas Choniates, *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. Harry J. Magoulias (Detroit, 1984), 625.24-5.

heavily affected by Latin invasions. Settlements not protected by natural boundaries such as mountains and rivers were left vulnerable to attacks by Latin invaders. Therefore, not only excessive taxation but also the insecurity caused by the attacks had an impact; in particular, the people living in the Aitolia region north of the Gulf of Corinth began to migrate to fortified cities in the interior of the country. This migration became so widespread that there were not even enough men to defend the castles in the walled towns of the region.¹³

This understanding of localism has become a fact that the central government can no longer ignore and must accept. Before the Palaiologos Dynasty, which was organised in Nicaea in 1261, conquered Constantinople, the cities of Thessaloniki and Kroia in the Balkans had returned to Byzantine rule. However, Byzantium was only able to achieve this by recognising local autonomy rights. Local autonomy was a manifestation of local consciousness that developed in an environment where state authority had weakened, and a new model of governance had emerged. The state was forced to accept this phenomenon, which had developed as a result of its own weakness.

However, despite the Empire of Nicaea recapturing Constantinople in 1261, the Despotate of Epirus refused to swear allegiance to Michael Palaiologos. Nevertheless, after the Italian-origin Orsini Dynasty overthrew the Komnenos Dynasty in a coup and seized power, Ioannina submitted to the Empire of Nicaea by obtaining two *chrysobull* (“imperial decrees”) granting significant autonomy from Andronikos II.¹⁴ This situation shows that Roman identity was still a powerful reference point in the search for political legitimacy and recognition.

However, Ioannina never fully came under the control of Constantinople, as the Serbian and Albanian invasions that began in the 1340s had greatly shaken Byzantine rule in the Balkans. These conquests led some aristocrats from the Vagenetia region to seek refuge in Ioannina. By the second half of the 14th century, Roman identity had become quite prominent in Ioannina. For this reason, Despot II Nikephoros (c. 1355–1358), who promised to expel the Albanians from Epirus, and Despot Thomas Preljubović (1367–1384), known as the ‘Albanian Slayer,’ won the support of the people of Ioannina.¹⁵

Although these invasions did not directly target Ioannina, the city was unable to escape the influence of these foreign elements. The main reason for this was that the Roman population in Ioannina did not have the demographic structure necessary to sustain the state. Just as Constantinople needed a steady supply of people from the countryside due to demographic fluctuations caused by high death rates,¹⁶ a similar need also applied to

13 Nicol, ‘Refugees, Mixed Population and Local Patriotism in Epiros and Western Macedonia after the Fourth Crusade’, 19.

14 Soustal and Koder, *Nikopolis Und Kephallēnia*, 166.

15 Brendan Osswald, ‘Citizenship in Medieval Ioannina’, in *Citizenship in Historical Perspective* (Pisa University Press, 2006), 99.

16 Nikephoros, *Patriarch of Constantinople Short History*, ed. and trans. Cyril Mango (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990), 140–41, 160–61. The demographic deficit was particularly evident in areas such as construction. For example, Constantine V brought new settlers to Constantinople from mainland Greece and the Aegean islands in order to repopulate the capital after the devastating plague of 747 and to rebuild sections of the aqueduct that the Avars had destroyed some 140 years earlier in 766.

Ioannina. Furthermore, as mentioned above, Ioannina, like Byzantium, needed military power. However, unlike Byzantium, Ioannina was in direct contact with the societies surrounding it, which were considered ‘barbarian’; therefore, it had to meet its military and administrative needs not from the Romans, but often from the elements it referred to as ‘barbarian.’

Indeed, Despot Thomas Preljubović, known as the ‘Albanian Slayer,’ was a Serb, and during his rule, some Serb elements were settled in Ioannina, granted property, and married to Roman women.¹⁷ Therefore, the difference between the attitude of the people of Ioannina in the 1320s and their attitude after 1359 was largely due to their capacity to renew their population. The development that made this change urgent and inevitable was the capture of the old capital Arta by the Albanians in 1359. The Chronicle of Ioannina describes the Albanians as ill-tempered and bad-natured.¹⁸

Therefore, from the perspective of the people of Ioannina, there was a clear distinction between Serbs and Albanians: Serbs were seen as foreigners integrated into the system, while Albanians were considered excluded and not included in the system. This attitude was based on the structural difference between Albanians and Serbs in the eyes of the people of Ioannina. The Serbian society was not directly influenced by Byzantine missionary activities, but rather opened up in accordance with its own inclinations. The Serbs had a deep admiration for Byzantine civilisation, and the transition to Orthodox Christianity largely took place in accordance with their own demands. This admiration led to a multi-layered cultural adoption process that extended not only to the religious sphere but also to Byzantine political ideology, administrative structure, use of titles, clothing style, artistic understanding, and even, at times, language.¹⁹

3. The Romans and the People of Ioannina

The Chronicle of Ioannina consistently uses the term Ῥωμαῖοι (“people of Rome”) or its grammatical derivatives Ῥωμαίων, Ῥωμαίους, Ῥωμαῖδα, to describe the people of *Ioannina* in the sections covering the years 1341–1359. This shows that Roman identity served as a means of constructing a sense of community in the face of ethnic differentiation. For example, in the first section, when mentioning the death of the historian Andronikos III, it reports that he left his βασιλεία τῶν Ῥωμαίων (“the empire of the Romans”) to his son Yannis.²⁰ Immediately afterwards, it records that the Serbian ruler Stefan Dušan violated the τὰ τῶν Ῥωμαίων ὅρια (“the borders of the Romans”) and devastated all Roman territories.²¹

The frequency of this term in the Greek text can be counted directly: in the section up to the war of 1359, the form Ῥωμαῖοι appears approximately three times. In section 1, the

17 Osswald, ‘Citizenship in Medieval Ioannina’, 100.

18 Brendan Osswald, ‘The Ethnic Composition of Medieval Epirus’, in *Imagining Frontiers, Contesting Identities*, ed. L. Klusáková and S. G. Ellis (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2007), 137, <https://univ-tlse2.hal.science/hal-02083128v1>.

19 Osswald, 142.

20 Leandros I. Vranousis, ‘To Chronikon ton Ioanninon Kat’ Anekdoton Dimodi Epitomin’, in *Epetiris tou Mesaionikou Archeiou*, vol. 12 (Athens: Academy of Athens, 1965), 74.

21 Vranousis, 74.

form *Ρωμαίων* appears twice explicitly (quoted above). Later in the narrative, in Chapter 4 (covering 1358–1359), the term appears once more: it is recounted that Despot Nikephoros brought back *τοὺς Ρωμαίους πάντας* (“all the Romans”) from exile.²² In total, *Ρωμαῖοι* (in any form) appears three times in the text before 1359.

After the war of 1359, the use of the term *Ρωμαῖοι* in the chronicle decreases significantly. Immediately after the war (late 1359), *Ρωμαῖοι* appears only once more. For example, in the fourth chapter, the chronicle uses the phrase “*τοὺς Ρωμαίους*” to describe the Byzantines returning from exile.²³ Apart from this, the term *Ρωμαῖοι* hardly appears at all in Chapter 5 and thereafter (1359–1399); the chronicle focuses more on local developments and actors.

This difference in usage reflects a change in the chronicle's perspective. Before the war, events are narrated in the broader context of the Roman (Byzantine) world – the fall of emperors, the actions of Serbian tsars against the Romans, and so on. After the war, however, the chronicle's continuation hardly mentions the term *Ρωμαῖοι* at all, because the Roman (Byzantine) political identity had effectively come to an end in Epirus. Instead, local leadership and identity come to the fore (as will be discussed below). In summary, the term *Ρωμαῖοι* appears three times in the pre-war text and only once in the post-war text.

The few remaining examples (such as Romans returning from exile) are echoes of the past and are not used again even immediately afterwards. In general, after the Battle of Achelous in 1359, the narrative shifts from the Roman imperial framework to the local community framework, and the local *Ἰωαννῖται* or “people of Ioannina” emerged.²⁴

This term first appears directly in the sections immediately following 1359. In context, after 1359, the chronicler's community identifies itself as *Ἰωαννῖται*. For example, when the nobles of Ioannina sought a new ruler, the text states that they sent a request to Syméon using the phrase ‘*οἱ τε Ἰωαννῖται καὶ οἱ ἔξωθεν ἐλθόντες*.’²⁵ Here, *Ἰωαννῖται* is used as a descriptor to distinguish the local aristocrats of Ioannina from outsiders. Later, when Thomas arrived, it is said that “...*οἱ Ἰωαννῖται τὸν ἐπενφήμησαν ὡς δεσπότην*...” (“the people of Ioannina applauded him as despot”).²⁶ In all of these passages, the term *Ἰωαννῖται* is used as a self-definition for the city's inhabitants.

The chronicler clearly associates this change with the collapse of Roman rule: after Ioannina emerged as “the only Roman city that did not fall,” the narrative no longer refers to its inhabitants as Romans.²⁷ The term *Ἰωαννῖται* therefore carries ideological weight: it shows that after the conquest, the leaders of Ioannina defined their identity in local terms. This implies that Ioannina no longer saw itself primarily as a city belonging to the Roman Empire, but as an autonomous community of people of Ioannina.

22 Vranousis, 76.

23 Vranousis, 76.

24 Vranousis, 78.

25 Vranousis, 79.

26 Vranousis, 95.

27 Vranousis, 77.

4. Foreigners in Ioannina Politics Based on the Example of Serbs

At first glance, this situation may seem to be directly related to the settlement of different ethnic groups, such as Serbs, in the region. Indeed, it can be argued that the political and cultural changes in the region following the war of 1359 created a need for the local population to redefine their identity, and that the arrival of a large Serbian population in the region during the reign of Thomas Preljubović may have contributed to this change. However, the term “people of Ioannina” did not include Serbs. While Serbs are explicitly recorded as a separate group in the Chronicle of Ioannina, the term ‘Ioannina people’ refers only to the native Greek population.

The individuals belonging to the aristocratic class, who were influential in the administration, were also members of the Greek-speaking Orthodox community. The chronicles report that during the despotism of Thomas, who was of Serbian origin, some of the *archontes* (ἀρχοντες, “the chief magistrates”) in the city—such as Konstantinos Vatatzes and Mihail from the Apsaras family—forced him into rebellion, while most were exiled under Thomas's pressure.²⁸ On the other hand, chronicles also record some Ioannina nobles who collaborated with Thomas; families such as Koutzotheodoros and Mihail Apsaras showed allegiance to Thomas and retained their titles and properties.²⁹ This situation reveals that the local aristocracy was largely of Greek origin and that the Serbian element was represented only through external administrative cadres.

The chronicles also report that Eudokia attempted to reshape the city's aristocracy by following a policy similar to that of Thomas; indeed, she exiled some of the nobles of Ioannina and assigned their estates to Serbian sympathisers.³⁰ However, after Thomas was deposed, many aristocrats who had been exiled returned, and heavy taxes were eased.³¹ These aristocrats also had a say in the city's administration at the parliamentary level. Similarly, in 1411, the city's aristocracy opposed the rule of Thomas' daughter, Eudokia Balšić: The members of the Ioannina senate rejected the idea of another Serbian despot and deposed the young Eudokia, inviting the Italian Duke Carlo Tocco to become the new ruler.³²

The text clearly mentions Serbs as a separate ethnic or social group, just like Albanians. However, Brendan Osswald states that Serbs managed to become part of the political system. After Thomas was deposed, his widow Maria Angelina married Eudokia Balsić, who, like Thomas's previous wife, was of Serbian origin. This marriage took place at a time when the Serbian State was far from being militarily effective in Epirus after its defeat at Kosovo Polje in 1389, and therefore served to demonstrate Serbian influence in Ioannina rather than providing any real military benefit. Indeed, although Esau's widow, who was of

28 Donald MacGillivray Nicol, *The Despotate of Epiros, 1267-1479: A Contribution to the History of Greece in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 1984), 144.

29 Nicol, 144.

30 Nicol, 174.

31 A. Shea, ‘The Late Byzantine City: Social, Economic and Institutional Profile’ (Dissertation, Birmingham, The University of Birmingham, 2010), 96.

32 Shea, 94.

Serbian origin, was expelled after his death in 1411, a Serbian named Stephen Bouisavos served as military commander of Ioannina between 1411 and 1430. According to Osswald, the Serbs were able to integrate into the political system through land acquisition, which was theoretically prohibited for foreigners but made possible through a foreign despot, and through military careers, which were mostly undertaken by foreigners.³³ However, although there are negative attitudes towards Serbs, according to Osswald, not only Greeks but also Serbs have been victims of Thomas' wrath; this situation must also be considered.³⁴

Therefore, the origin of the reaction against the Serbs was not because they were Serbs, but because of the Greeks' fear of losing their superiority as a result of Thomas' actions. For this reason, the Greeks did not completely close their doors, as can be understood from their need for foreigners in order to maintain city administration. However, this situation still progressed within a certain hierarchy. The Greeks were at the top of the hierarchy, followed by the Italians and Serbs. However, in recent times, the Italians had fallen to second place and the Serbs to third. The Albanians, on the other hand, were not included in this classification because they were never welcomed in Ioannina.

5. Political System

As can be understood, there is no ethnic difference between the “Romans” and the “people of Ioannina”. In this context, Ioannina identity does not indicate an ethnic composition different from Roman identity. However, the year 1359 marks the beginning of a new era for Ioannina, one from which Constantinople would never return. This situation helps explain why the term *Ρωμαῖοι* was no longer used after 1359, from the perspective that the concept of *Romanitas* is primarily accepted as a political definition in the general literature. However, this assumption is insufficient to explain the use of *Romanitas* during periods when Byzantine authority was not felt in the region. Furthermore, it does not fully align with Stefan Dušan's addition of the term ‘Romans’ in 1343, which he used to imbue his title of ‘King of Serbia, Albania, and the Coast’ with an ethnic meaning..³⁵

However, as mentioned above, *Romanitas* as a political concept and *Romanitas* in ethnic terms were intertwined. Therefore, the transition from *Romanitas* to Ioannina signified both a political and ethnic distinction, and it is seen that Ioannina politics provided a decisive ground for the formation of Ioannina. After 1204, wealthy immigrant families from Byzantium and Constantinople dominated Ioannina politics. The *chrysobull* of 1319 also confirms the extensive real estate and privileges of the *castro* (κάστρο, “fortress”) in question; in fact, a castle in the city was allocated to Simeon Strategopoulos, and the Strategopoulos dynasty was rewarded with the patronage of Carlo Tocco.³⁶ Thus, aristocrats had control not only over their wealth but also over garrison command, judicial powers, and exclusive land allocations. The only structural element that limited the political influence of the aristocracy was their loyalty to the central authority (Byzantine, Serbian, or Italian).

33 Osswald, ‘Citizenship in Medieval Ioannina’, 99–101.

34 Osswald, ‘The Ethnic Composition of Medieval Epirus’, 141.

35 John V. A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans: A Critical Survey From the Late Twelfth Century to the Ottoman Conquest* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 309.

36 Shea, ‘The Late Byzantine City’, 147.

However, the people of Ioannina had the right to object if the governor's authority turned into despotism. Indeed, the 1319 decree stated that if the governor turned to tyranny, the people could appeal directly to the emperor and demand his removal.³⁷

This situation gave the aristocrats an indirect authority to monitor and limit the ruler appointed by the emperor. The senate mentioned above was also formed by aristocratic elements; indeed, during the revolution in 1411, the Ioannina senate was composed of the city's leading *clericus* (“clergy”) and *archontes*. According to records, only the *archontes* could actually participate in political life, and they were granted privileges that distinguished them from other classes. For example, in the early 15th century, the *archontes* in the city pledged allegiance to their own despots instead of the Byzantine emperor.³⁸

In the early years of the Despotate of Epirus, the Byzantine administrative tradition continued, and the bureaucracy of the Nicopolis theme centred in Arta was taken over. Its geographical isolation and its structure surrounded by the sea to the west provided Epirus with a significant degree of autonomy from the beginning of the 13th century onwards; Epirus created a long-term independence environment while the remaining large parts of the Eastern Roman Empire remained under Latin rule.³⁹ During this period, the Epirus administration continued feudal-like practices that granted lifelong or property rights to civil servants and soldiers within the framework of the pronioia system developed by Byzantium in the 11th-13th centuries. On the other hand, this system, also influenced by geography, led to the erosion of Byzantine identity over time. For example, the Epirus despots were introduced to the “suzerainty” and inheritance system in the West; after the death of Nikephoros, the claim of Western inheritance law in favour of the children his wife left in Italy came to the fore. Philip of Taranto’s claim to the Epirus throne with Western-based law, despite being contrary to Byzantine tradition, came to the fore in the context of Western law.⁴⁰ As a result, although the administration of Epirus was based on Byzantine traditions, the influence of Western political ideas – such as monarchical rights and vassalage relations – increased. The social structure shifted to Western-style feudalism; military commanders (both native and of Italian and Albanian origin) who effectively held the castles and villages in Epirus were able to inherit them. This led to the dissolution of the central administration around 1400: an old, centralized economy and administrative system had largely disintegrated before the 15th century, and feudal local administrations emerged in the provinces.⁴¹

In Epirus, as seen in Byzantium, there were marriages with Latins; however, the effect of these marriages in Epirus was different. For example, Izabella, the daughter of Nikephoros I Komnenos, established this kind of diplomatic caliphate by marrying the son of Charles II, the king of Naples. However, when Nikephoros I died, his wife Anna

37 Shea, 146.

38 Giuseppe Schirò, ed., *Cronaca Dei Tocco Di Cefalonia*, Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1975), 310.

39 Nicol, *The Despotate of Epiros*, I.

40 Michael Goodyear, ‘Despotate of Epirus’, World History Encyclopedia, 10 August 2020, https://www.worldhistory.org/Despotate_of_Epirus/.

41 For more information Nicol, *The Despotate of Epiros*.

donated some port cities to her daughter's new husband as a dowry and thus ensured that her son Thomas ascended to the throne, which was an arrangement carried out according to Western law; this situation showed that Western law and Byzantine traditions contradicted each other.⁴²

Another reflection of this political differentiation was emerging in the cultural sphere. During the Komnenos-Angelos dynasty, when the claim of *Romanitas* was maintained, the adherence to the traditional Byzantine pictorial language in the works of art in the Epirus region continued; in addition to local and individual forms of expression, an original style began to develop with the contribution of Western-originated ornamentation and architectural elements, especially under the influence of Italian and Latin art.⁴³ For example, the octagonal plan with a central dome of the Paregoritissa Monastery in Arta deviates from the classical late-Byzantine typology and approaches the octagonal church forms common in the West. In some buildings, the use of local stonework together with traces of Gothic needle towers in dome transition systems and façade cladding is a concrete indicator of the East-West synthesis.⁴⁴ In the wall paintings of the churches of Epirus, in addition to traditional Byzantine iconography, there are depictions of nature, portraits of local saints and rare scenes (such as the Seven Sleepers), while table panels or floral borders belonging to the Latin tradition accompany the program. In this way, art in Epirus continues the Byzantine heritage while merging with regional characteristics and Western influences to create a new aesthetic language.⁴⁵

6. Definition of Ioannina identity in the Western Context

These influences coming from the Latin world were preparing the ground for the formation of a new structure that was not limited to the concept of “Ioannina identity”. At this point, when considered in the Byzantine context, the concept of “West” became decisive in defining the structure in question. George Akropolites, who accepted the Empire of Nicaea as the legitimate heir of the true Rome, coded the emergence of the Despotate of Epirus and through it the Empire of Thessalonica as a structure that was the opposite of Nicaea and “other”, that is, as the “West”. Akropolites accused Theodore, the founder of the Empire of Thessalonica, of “barbarism”. The reason for this was that Theodore appointed him in a manner that was against tradition and without any knowledge of the functioning of the institutions.⁴⁶ Indeed, after his proclamation as emperor, Theodore granted the title of despot to his brothers Constantine and Manuel, but under Emperor Manuel Komnenos (1143–1180), the Despotate was granted to imperial sons-in-law who were considered to

42 Goodyear, ‘Despotate of Epirus’.

43 Leonela Fundic, ‘Η μνημειακή τέχνη του Δεσποτάτου της Ηπείρου την περίοδο της Δυναστείας των Κομνηνών Αγγέλων: 1204-1318 [I mnimeiaiki téchni tou Despotátou tis Ipeírou tin períoðo tis Dynasteías ton Komninón Angélon: 1204-1318]’ (Dissertation, Thessaloníkī, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2013), 213, <https://doi.org/10.12681/eadd/47315>.

44 Fundic, 72.

45 Fundic, 214–15. For more information on related topic Ioannis Chouliaras, ‘Thirteenth-Century Frescoes in Epirus with Western Influences’, in *Between East and West Saint Alexander Nevsky His Time and Image in Art* (International Scientific Conference 2021, Moscow: State Institute of Art Sciences, 2023), 302–16.

46 Georgii Acropolitae, *Opera*, ed. A. Heisenberg, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Aedibus B. G. Teubneri, 1903), 21.1-22.

inherit the throne and were considered husbands of the heir's daughter.⁴⁷

In addition, John Plytos, who served for a long time in the Epirus region, was granted the titles of *panhypersebastos*⁴⁸ and *mesazon* ("prime minister"). Some of the old Byzantine aristocratic families who took refuge in the region were appointed to the provincial governorships in cooperation with the local elite. Although the title of "Doux" was used, unlike in previous periods, these officials largely served as civil governors devoid of military authority. On the other hand, the frequent and generous distribution of the title of Theodore reduced the value of titles such as *Sebastos* or *Megalodoxotatos*, which were previously considered privileged, and caused these titles to become widespread among the urban nobility.⁴⁹ In this context, Akropolites accuses Theodore of trying to imitate the superior political structure of the Roman Empire, but failing to do so properly and establishing a system of government specific to the 'inferior' and 'uncivilized West'.⁵⁰

Therefore, it was not possible for the Epirus people, who lived under a barbaric administration, to be considered Romans within this framework. In this context, Akropolites uses the concept of *genos* to describe an ethnic group, not a family, and argues that Westerners—that is, the Epirus people—easily submitted to all rulers because they were afraid of death and were concerned about protecting their wealth.⁵¹ He also states that the race of the people living in the Western regions lacks endurance and has a changeable structure.⁵² This approach is important because Akropolites, like Choniates, defines barbarism through behavioural differences. In this context, what Akropolites does is to include people living in the West in this classification and place them below *Romanitas*.

Therefore, the change that Akropolites meant by the concept of 'West' (although it had a negative meaning) expressed a mixture of political identity and ethnic consciousness. In this context, *Romanitas* was not synonymous with speaking Greek and being Orthodox. When the reflections of this understanding in general Byzantine literature are considered, the fact that the people of Ioannina started to use the term 'Ioannina' in 1359, at a time when they had completely severed their political ties with Rome, does not only express a political break. At the same time, it reveals that the sense of local belonging overshadowed the consciousness of *Romanitas*, and a new *genos* was adopted by the people living together, although not in the negative sense defined by Akropolites.

Indeed, in the negotiations for the surrender of Arta, the capital of the Despotate of Epirus in 1339/40, John Kantakouzenos, who came from Constantinople, considered it injustice for the Artaians to oppose the Roman authority centred in Constantinople, which

47 Jonathan Harris, Catherine Holmes, and Eugenia Russell, *Byzantines, Latins, and Turks in the Eastern Mediterranean World after 1150*, Oxford Studies in Byzantium (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 196.

48 A Byzantine court title equal in the rank with that of *megas domestikos* created by Alexius Comnenos I.

49 Barzôs, *Ē Genealogía Tōn Komnēnōn*, 2:584–589.

50 Ioannis Smarnakis, 'Political Power, Space, and Identities in the State of Epiros (1205–1318)', in *The Routledge Handbook on Identity in Byzantium*, by Michael Edward Stewart, David Alan Parnell, and Conor Whately, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2022), 305, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429031373-20>.

51 Acropolitae, *Opera*, 80.44–61. .

52 R. Macrides, trans., *George Akropolites: The History* (Oxford, 2007), 167.15–22. .

had ruled over their ancestors since the time of Caesar. In response, the Artaians, without emphasizing their Roman identity, stated that their loyalty to the Angeloi dynasty was legitimate; however, they stated that due to the unfavourable military situation they were in, they had to submit to the emperor in order to protect themselves and their *patris*.⁵³

7. Conclusion

This study examines the dynamics of local identity and political autonomy that developed in Ioannina after the 1204 Crusade, the tendencies towards independence from Byzantium, and how the concept of “*Romanitas*” gave way to the concept of “Ioannina identity” within the framework of the historical process. The main findings of the study are that the emphasis on local belonging that emerged in Ioannina with the weakening of the central authority after the rupture of 1204 accelerated the transformation of Roman identity in ethnic and political terms; this transformation reached a clear rupture point with the Battle of Achelous in 1359. In particular, the decline in the use of the term *Ρωμαῖοι* in chronicles and its replacement by the definition of *Ἰωαννῖται* revealed that the people of Ioannina no longer saw themselves as part of the Roman society centred in Istanbul, but as their own autonomous community. This study has made a new contribution to the literature on local identity formation. Through the example of Epirus, it has been demonstrated with concrete examples how political autonomy and geographical isolation interacted with the central authority in shaping the perception of ethnic identity. While general discussions on the imperial center-periphery relations are generally highlighted in the existing literature, the local aristocracy, migration policies and the impact of individual despotic decisions on identity in the case of Ioannina are among the first studies to be systematically evaluated. Thus, it has become theoretically understandable how the ideological dimension of the transition from “*Romanitas*” to “Ioannina identity” and local-political practices fed each other.

However, the study has some limitations. First, the quantitative analysis of the term usage in the chronicle texts was conducted with a limited sample; variants in different manuscripts and regional sources may affect the interpretation of the process. Second, the differences between social layers (peasants, urban artisans, etc. aristocracy) have not been sufficiently detailed. A broader demographic perspective can show how local identity practices changed among different social groups.

Future studies could examine the regional diversity of local autonomy forms by focusing on comparative analyses with cities in Epirus other than Ioannina (Arta, Nikopolis, etc.). In addition, parallels could be explored between the identity definitions of pre-Ottoman Balkan monarchies and the transformation in Ioannina. Interactive maps and geographic information systems (GIS) could be used to detail the effects of changes in migration routes, settlement policies, and economic networks on identity formation. Finally, the process of autonomy that began in Ioannina after 1204 is an important historical case in which a political apparatus independent of the central authority and the solidarity of the local aristocracy ideologically transformed the Roman heritage and constructed the

53 Ioannis Cantacuzenus, *Ioannis Cantacuzeni Eximperatoris Historiarum Libri IV*, ed. Ludwig Schopen, vol. 1, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* (Bonn, 1828), 523, 1-524, 6. .

“Ioannina” identity. This transformation is not only a cultural preference; it deepens our understanding of post-Byzantine local identity theories as an expression of the search for regional autonomy and political legitimacy.

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