

RALEIGH LECTURE ON HISTORY

ITALY, MOUNT ATHOS, AND MUSCOVY:  
THE THREE WORLDS OF  
MAXIMOS THE GREEK (c.1470–1556)

BY DIMITRI OBOLENSKY

*Fellow of the Academy*

Read 1 June 1981

IN the spring of 1553 the Tsar Ivan IV (later known as The Terrible) left his capital, Moscow, on a pilgrimage. The journey, to a monastery in the far north, was intended as an act of thanksgiving for his recovery from a recent, and nearly fatal, illness. The royal party, including the Tsaritsa and Ivan's newly born child, stopped on the way in St. Sergius's Monastery of the Holy Trinity, Russia's most hallowed monastic house. Within its walls lived a man of almost legendary fame. A Greek monk from Mount Athos, over eighty years of age, he had spent the past thirty-five years in Russia, more than half of them in monastic gaols. To educated Russians he was known as a scholar of great learning, a prolific writer in their language, and a man of great constancy and courage. His name was Maximos—Maxim to the Russians. The aged monk and the young sovereign met and talked. Maxim urged the Tsar to abandon his pilgrimage and return to Moscow. Far better, he argued, to comfort the families of the Russian soldiers killed in the recent war against the Tatars than to persist on what was clearly a long and dangerous journey; and he warned Ivan that, if he did so persist, his infant son would die. The Tsar declined to alter his plans; and the child died on the way.

The story of this brief encounter between arguably the two most remarkable men in sixteenth-century Russia was told, some twenty years later, by a fervent admirer of Maxim, Prince Andrey Kurbsky.<sup>1</sup> This distinguished general, a former favourite of Ivan, disgusted at the Tsar's growing absolutism, had deserted to Lithuania in 1564. He surely knew much about his teacher's life: including the fact that as a young man Maxim had lived in Italy. Exactly how much of his biography Maxim revealed to Kurbsky

<sup>1</sup> *Prince A. M. Kurbsky's History of Ivan IV*, ed. with translation and notes by J. L. I. Fennell (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 76–81, 90–1.

we do not know: there were several episodes in it which, as we shall see, he would have been wise to conceal.

Some of these episodes have come to light only recently. In 1942 the Russian scholar Élie Denissoff published in Louvain a book entitled *Maxime le Grec et l'Occident*.<sup>1</sup> In it he proved conclusively that Maximus was none other than Michael Trivolis, a Greek expatriate who frequented the humanist schools of Italy in the late fifteenth century. It is not often that the biography of a major historical figure is so unexpectedly enlarged by a scholarly discovery; and Denissoff could justifiably claim that, thanks to his book, the life of Maximus the Greek assumed the shape of a diptych, of which Mount Athos is the hinge, and Italy and Muscovite Russia are the two leaves.

There is no need to rehearse here Denissoff's arguments. They are based on compelling historical, literary, and graphological evidence, and are generally accepted today. Thus, in any account of the life and work of Maximus the Greek, we must start with Michael Trivolis.

The Trivolai were a Byzantine family of moderate distinction. They spawned a Patriarch of Constantinople in the mid-fourteenth century<sup>2</sup> and, a little later, a correspondent of the Emperor Manuel II.<sup>3</sup> One branch settled in Mistra in the Peloponnese. Michael was born in Arta, the capital of the Greek province of Epirus, about 1470. Some twenty years earlier the city had fallen to the Turks, and before long the family decided to emigrate. The nearest refuge was the island of Corfu, then under Venetian sovereignty. Greek families from the mainland had been gathering there for some time, drawn not only by the prospect of security, but also by the presence on the island of a group of distinguished Greek scholars.

Michael was probably about ten years old when his family moved from Arta to Corfu. When he was about twenty he stood for election to the island's Governing Council. The results were not calculated to guide him towards a public career: 20 votes were cast for him, 73 against.<sup>4</sup> It was probably in 1492 that he moved to Florence, then the leading centre of Greek studies in Europe. In

<sup>1</sup> E. Denissoff, *Maxime le Grec et l'Occident. Contribution à l'histoire de la pensée religieuse et philosophique de Michel Trivolis* (Paris-Louvain, 1942).

<sup>2</sup> Kallistos I. See Denissoff, *op. cit.*, p. 119, n. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Denissoff, *op. cit.*, p. 119; *The Letters of Manuel II Palaeologus*, ed. G. T. Dennis (Washington DC, 1977), pp. 24-7; J. W. Barker, *Manuel II Palaeologus (1391-1425): A Study in Late Byzantine Statesmanship* (New Brunswick, 1969), p. 36, n. 93.

<sup>4</sup> Denissoff, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-6, 143-5, and pls. I and II.

Florence, where he remained for three years, his vocation as a scholar was shaped by the teaching of the Greek philologist John Lascaris and by the influence of the great Platonist Marsilio Ficino. Many years later, writing in Moscow, Maximos remembered Florence as the fairest of all the Italian cities he had known.<sup>1</sup> The influence of Plato and of the Florentine 'Platonic Academy' were to remain with him, for better or for worse, all his life.

Another, very different influence was felt by Michael during his years in Florence: that of the Dominican friar Savonarola. He probably never met him personally; but he certainly heard him preach. The full impact of this influence was to come later, after Savonarola's execution in 1498. Later still, in Moscow, he wrote for the Russians a detailed account of Savonarola's life, describing his famous Lenten sermons, his conflict with the Pope, and his grisly execution in Florence. He extolled him as a man 'filled with every kind of wisdom', and added, perhaps with a touch of tactful self-censorship, that, had Savonarola not belonged to the Latin faith, he would surely have been numbered among the Church's holy confessors.<sup>2</sup> Attempts have been made—not wholly convincing, in my view—to trace in Maxim's Russian writings the influence of several works of Savonarola, in particular of his *canzone De ruina ecclesiae*, and his meditation on the Psalm *Miserere mei Deus*, written in a Florentine prison, while he was awaiting his last trial and execution.<sup>3</sup> More easily identifiable, and more important, is the influence of the Italian friar on Maxim's later concern with moral problems, on his love of poverty, and perhaps too on his outspokenness and courage in adversity.

In one of his later writings Maxim described in some detail the University of Paris. He dwelt on its curriculum of studies, the high quality of the teaching, given free of charge thanks to a royal endowment, and its role as an international institution: its students, he wrote, who come from all over western and northern Europe, return home, to become ornaments and useful members of their societies.<sup>4</sup> It has sometimes been assumed that Michael

<sup>1</sup> *Sochineniya prepodobnogo Maksima Greka*, iii (Kazan, 1862), 194; Denissoff, op. cit., pp. 156-7, 423.

<sup>2</sup> *Sochineniya*, iii. 194-202; Denissoff, op. cit., pp. 423-8; V. S. Ikonnikov, *Maksim Grek i ego vremya*, 2nd edn. (Kiev, 1915), pp. 118-23; A. I. Ivanov, *Literaturnoe nasledie Maksima Greka* (Leningrad, 1969), pp. 156-7.

<sup>3</sup> K. Viskovatyy, 'K voprosu o literaturnom vliyaniy Savonaroly na Maksima Greka', *Slavia*, xvii (1939-40), 128-33; A. I. Ivanov, 'Maksim Grek i Savonarola', *Trudy Otdela Drevnerusskoy Literatury*, xxiii (1968), 217-26.

<sup>4</sup> *Sochineniya*, iii. 179-80; Denissoff, op. cit., pp. 430-1.

visited Paris. This is unlikely; though he did announce to the Russians—quite possibly for the first time—the discovery of America, more precisely of a large land called Cuba.<sup>1</sup>

The next stage in Michael's life in Italy, after brief visits to Bologna, Padua, and Milan, took him in 1496 to Venice where he remained for the next two years. There he became associated with Aldus Manutius, who was then producing his celebrated editions of the Greek classics. He later told a Russian correspondent that he often visited Aldus for reasons which had to do with books.<sup>2</sup> It may be that Michael was actually employed in the Aldine press, and that he worked on the edition of Aristotle which Aldus was then preparing in Venice; but we cannot be certain of this. His later work as a translator from Greek into Slavonic suggests that he had been trained to edit texts; an expertise which, we shall see, was not without its dangers in Muscovite Russia.

By this time Michael must have acquired some reputation as a scholar. In a letter dated 1498 he mentions several offers of gainful employment he has recently received.<sup>3</sup> In the same year we find him in the service of another Italian, the distinguished Hellenist Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, nephew of the celebrated Platonist Giovanni Pico. The four years which he spent at Mirandola were an important landmark in his life. Gianfrancesco Pico was not only a classical scholar, a true *ἑλληνομανής*, as Michael wrote to a friend in March 1500.<sup>4</sup> He was also a convinced Christian, a student of patristic writings, and a great admirer of Savonarola. The news of Savonarola's execution was received at Mirandola while Michael was there.

It is hardly possible to gain a clear impression of the state of Michael's mind around the year 1500. Three distinct influences undoubtedly worked on him at the time, and they must have been hard to reconcile: Platonic philosophy and classical scholarship; the Christian patristic tradition, no doubt familiar from his early youth, but now apprehended more deeply after his stay at Mirandola; and the impact of the life and teaching of Savonarola. Of the three the last, for the moment, proved the strongest. A note in an unpublished chronicle of the monastery of San Marco in Florence states that in 1502 Michael ('Frater Michael Emmanuelis de civitate Arta') was professed as a monk of that

<sup>1</sup> *Sochineniya*, iii. 44; Denissoff, op. cit., p. 423. Cf. I. Ševčenko, 'Byzantium and the Eastern Slavs after 1453', *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, ii (1978), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Denissoff, op. cit., pp. 190-7, 429-30; Ikonnikov, op. cit., pp. 134-5; Ivanov, op. cit., pp. 207-9.

<sup>3</sup> Denissoff, op. cit., pp. 398-401.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402.

monastery.<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that this was the very house of which Savonarola had been the prior. Many years later Michael described to the Russians in considerable detail the life and organization of the Dominican order, while carefully concealing the fact that he had belonged to it himself.<sup>2</sup> His secret was to remain undiscovered for more than four centuries.

Michael Trivolis's career as a Dominican was brief. On 21 April 1504 he wrote from Florence to an Italian friend, to announce that he had abandoned the monastic life. In evident distress, he compared himself to a ship tossed by the waves in the midst of the sea, and begged for help in his present affliction (*τῆς παρούσης θλίψεως*).<sup>3</sup> Denissoff, who published this letter, concluded, no doubt rightly, that Michael was deliberately vague as to the reasons for the apparent collapse of his religious vocation.<sup>4</sup>

In 1505 or 1506, after yet another change whose causes remain mysterious, we find Michael, now as the monk Maximos, in the Monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos, back in the Church of his fathers. It is perhaps unwise to imagine a formal conversion. The hostility between Greeks and Latins had certainly hardened during the past centuries, and the ill-starred Council of Florence in 1439 had, on the whole, not helped matters. Yet in a number of Greek communities, not least in Venice and Corfu, a more tolerant attitude towards the Latin Church prevailed, and a surprising degree of liturgical concelebration and inter-communion was permitted; the rift in the body of Christendom was not yet complete. The same, in the first half of the sixteenth century, seems to have been true of one of the leading Athonite houses, the Great Lavra; though not of Maximos's own monastery of Vatopedi, where a harsher attitude towards the Latins prevailed.<sup>5</sup> In his Russian writings Maximos severely criticized several Latin beliefs and practices, which he roundly denounced as heretical. Foremost among them was the doctrine of the *Filioque*, the major bone of theological contention between the Greek and the Roman Churches since the ninth century. The other major issue, the claims of the Papacy to exercise direct and universal jurisdiction throughout the Christian Church, is touched upon more lightly by Maximos. Most of his strictures are directed at what he considered to be the Popes' arrogant desire to extend their own power.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 95, 458; Ivanov, op. cit., p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> *Sochineniia*, iii. 182-94; Denissoff, op. cit., pp. 249-52.

<sup>3</sup> Denissoff, op. cit., pp. 404-6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 95-6, 261-2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 436-45.

On the whole, Maximos's criticism of the Latin Church was measured and courteous, and lacked the emotional overtones of the anti-Latin pronouncements of many of his contemporaries, Greek and Russian.<sup>1</sup>

The ten years or so which Maximos spent on Mount Athos were a crucial period in his life. Unfortunately, it is also the least well documented. A few writings by him have survived from this period, mostly Greek epitaphs in verse.<sup>2</sup> They are distinguished by elegance of form and a liking for classical imagery. On a deeper level, there is no doubt that on Mount Athos Maximos immersed himself in Byzantine literature, both religious and secular. The libraries of Mount Athos, well-stocked in the Middle Ages, had become richer still after the fall of Constantinople. Thus Maximos's former teacher John Lascaris had purchased from the Athonite monks a large number of manuscripts for the Library of Lorenzo de' Medici. It was almost certainly in Vatopedi that Maximos studied in depth the works of John of Damascus, the Byzantine theologian who seems to have been the most congenial to him, and whom he later described as having reached 'the summit of philosophy and theology'.<sup>3</sup> Among the early Fathers Gregory of Nazianzus appears to have been his favourite.<sup>4</sup> Of the secular Byzantine works, the one he used, and translated most frequently in Russia, was the encyclopaedia known today as *Suda* and formerly believed to have been written by a certain Suidas.<sup>5</sup>

Another feature of Mount Athos which bears directly upon Maximos's subsequent life and outlook was its cosmopolitanism. Since the early Middle Ages the Holy Mountain had been a place of meeting and co-operation between men from different countries of eastern Europe. In the late Middle Ages, partly owing to a considerable increase in the number of Slav monks, it played a particularly important role as a pan-Orthodox monastic centre. The revival of the contemplative tradition of Byzantine Hesychasm attracted men from Serbia, Bulgaria, Rumania, and Russia, as

<sup>1</sup> On Maximos's views of the *Filioque*, see B. Schultze, 'Maksim Grek als Theologe', *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, clxvii (1963), 245-55; on his attitude to the Papal claims, see *ibid.*, pp. 283-90.

<sup>2</sup> See Denissoff, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-9, 412-20.

<sup>3</sup> *Sochineniya*, iii. 66. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 210, 227, 232-3. Cf. Ikonnikov, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-5.

<sup>4</sup> See D. M. Bulanin, *Maksim Grek i vizantiyskaya literaturnaya traditsiya* (Avtoreferat na soiskanie uchenoy stepeni kandidata filologicheskikh nauk) (Leningrad, 1978), pp. 11-13.

<sup>5</sup> Ivanov, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-79; N. V. Sinitsyna, *Maksim Grek v Rossii* (Moscow, 1977), pp. 58-60, 67-9; Bulanin, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-18.

well as Greeks from Byzantium, to this famed nursery of the spiritual life. In the Greek and Slav monasteries of Athos, manuscripts were copied and collated, literary works were exchanged, and Byzantine texts translated into Slavonic.<sup>1</sup> In the early sixteenth century, despite the Ottoman conquests, this spiritual and cultural co-operation continued, and it is hard to believe that Maximos remained unaffected by this cosmopolitan Graeco-Slav environment. It must have prepared him in some degree for his future work in Muscovy.

It has been suggested that Maximos, as a product of the humanist schools of Renaissance Italy, and with the burden of his recent Dominican past, may have felt isolated, if not ostracized, in the contemporary climate of Mount Athos.<sup>2</sup> His superiors at Vatopedi were certainly not ignorant of his life in Italy. And it is true that his attachment to Plato, which went back to his early days in Florence, was a potential hazard in an Orthodox monastic society whose thinking, recently moulded by the teachings of the Hesychast theologian Gregory Palamas, was profoundly hostile to all forms of Platonism. Yet there is no evidence that Maximos encountered on Mount Athos any difficulties on this score. To judge from his later Russian writings, he was fully aware, from a strictly orthodox standpoint, of the pitfalls of Platonism; and he explicitly rejected some of Plato's teachings, such as the belief he ascribed to him in the co-eternity of God and the world.<sup>3</sup> Maximos's views on the relationship of faith to knowledge were unimpeachably orthodox. 'Do not think', he wrote in Russia, 'that I condemn all external [i.e. secular] learning that is useful. . . . I am not so ungrateful a student of this learning. Although I did not long remain on its threshold, yet I condemn those who pursue it through excessive rational inquiry.'<sup>4</sup> It seems that Maximos adapted quickly to his Athonite environment: certainly for the rest of his life he regarded the Holy Mountain as his true spiritual home.

It was in 1516 that the last period of Maximos's life began. In that year an embassy from the Muscovite ruler, Basil III, arrived on Mount Athos. Its purpose was to invite to Moscow a competent Greek translator. The Russian Church, from its birth in the tenth

<sup>1</sup> See I. Dujčev, 'Tsentry vizantiisko-slavyanskogo obshcheniya i sotrudnichestva', *Trudy Otdela Drevnerusskoy Literatury*, xix (1963), 107-29.

<sup>2</sup> Denissoff, *op. cit.*, pp. 293-301.

<sup>3</sup> J. V. Haney, *From Italy to Muscovy. The Life and Works of Maxim the Greek* (Munich, 1973), pp. 138-52.

<sup>4</sup> *Sochineniya*, i (Kazan, 1859-60), 462.

century and until the mid-fifteenth, has been subordinated to the Patriarch of Constantinople. During this period, and especially between 1350 and 1450, the royal library had been enriched by a large number of Greek manuscripts brought from Byzantium.<sup>1</sup> By the early sixteenth century few Russians were capable of reading them. There was need of an expert to decipher them and translate them into Slavonic.

The choice of the Muscovites had fallen on the Greek monk Savvas of the Vatopedi monastery, who seems to have been a translator of repute. Savvas, however, was too old and infirm to travel and, as the next best, the Athonite authorities chose Maximos. In his letter to the metropolitan of Moscow, the abbot recommended Maximos in terms which show that the latter was respected on Mount Athos not only for his spiritual qualities: he described him as 'our most honourable brother Maximos . . . , proficient in divine Scripture and adept in interpreting all kinds of books, both ecclesiastical and those called Hellenic [i.e. secular], because from his early youth he has grown up in them and learned [to understand] them through the practice of virtue, and not simply by reading them often, as others do'.<sup>2</sup>

On his journey north Maximos and his companions stopped for a while in Constantinople. There can be little doubt that the Patriarchate took this opportunity to brief him on the two vital issues which then dominated its relations with Russia: the wish to restore its authority over the Russian Church, which had lapsed in the mid-fifteenth century; and the hope of obtaining from Muscovy aid, material or political, for the Greek Orthodox subjects of the Sultan.

Maxim (as we may now call him, using the Russian form of his name) arrived in Moscow in March 1518. His first task was to prepare a translation of patristic commentaries on the Psalter. On purely linguistic grounds, his qualifications were meagre. His abbot, in a letter to the Muscovite sovereign, stated that Maximos knew no Russian. He may well, however, have had at least a smattering of one of the other Slavonic languages spoken on Mount Athos. He seems, in any case, to have acquired some knowledge of Russian fairly soon after his arrival in Moscow. And in his old age, one of his disciples tells us, he knew Russian, Serbian,

<sup>1</sup> Doubts have been cast on the existence of this library: S. Belokurov, *O biblioteke moskovskikh gosudarey v XVI stoletii* (Moscow, 1898). See, however, Ikonnikov, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-66.

<sup>2</sup> *Akty istoricheskie, sobrannye i izdannye Arkheograficheskoyu Kommissiyeu*, i (St. Petersburg, 1841), no. 122, p. 176.



Bulgarian, and Church Slavonic, in addition to Greek and Latin.<sup>1</sup> For the present, however, faced with translating the commentaries on the Psalter, it must be admitted that his equipment was poor. According to a reliable contemporary source, Maxim translated from Greek into Latin, which his Russian collaborators then rendered into Slavonic.<sup>2</sup> This astonishingly cumbersome procedure could hardly fail to result in errors of translation: for these Maxim was later to pay dearly.

The request to translate a collection of patristic commentaries on the Psalter was not due to a passing interest of Russian churchmen in biblical exegesis. It was prompted by hard and urgent necessities. In his introduction to the completed translation, Maxim assured the Grand Prince that the work will be useful in fighting heretics.<sup>3</sup> At that time, the Muscovite state and the Russian Church were struggling to eradicate the remains of the heresy of the 'Judaisers', which at the turn of the fifteenth century had posed a serious threat to the Orthodox Church in their domains. The tenets of the Russian 'Judaisers' are imperfectly known: they appear to have included a disbelief in the Trinity, the rejection of the cult of icons, and a strong attack on the hierarchy of the Church. It is possible, though not certain, that the 'Judaisers' had links with early Protestant movements in Central Europe. The heresy was first attested in Novgorod in 1470, and ten years later spread to Moscow, where it is said to have gained powerful support in government and church circles.<sup>4</sup> Russian society divided sharply over the right manner of treating the heretics, one party demanding their physical extermination, the other urging milder measures, particularly when they repented of their errors. The militants were led by two formidable churchmen, Gennady, Archbishop of Novgorod, and Joseph, abbot of the monastery of Volokolamsk. Gennady was a great admirer of the Spanish Inquisition. He and Joseph finally won over the Grand Prince to their view, and in 1504 the leaders of

<sup>1</sup> Ivanov, op. cit., p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> This was stated, at the time the work was carried out, by Dimitri Gerasimov, a leading diplomat who was Maxim's principal Russian assistant: *Pribavleniya k izdaniyu tvoreniy svyatykh ottsov*, xviii (Moscow, 1859), 190. Cf. Ivanov, op. cit., p. 41; Haney, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> *Sochineniya*, ii (Kazan, 1860), 303; Ikonnikov, op. cit., pp. 168-9.

<sup>4</sup> On the 'Judaisers', see N. A. Kazakova and Ya. S. Lur'e, *Antifeodal'nye ereticheskie dvizheniya na Rusi XIV—nachala XVI veka* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1955); A. I. Klibanov, *Reformatsionnye dvizheniya v Rossii v XIV—pervoy polovine XVI v.v.* (Moscow, 1960); Ya. S. Lur'e, *Ideologicheskaya bor'ba v russkoy publitsistike kontsa XV—nachala XVI veka* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1960).

the 'Judaisers' were publicly burned. The 'Josephians', as the militants were now called after their leader, were opposed by a group of laymen and ecclesiastics whose leaders came from remote hermitages in the north of the country, and were known as 'Elders from beyond the Volga'. They had no truck with heresy, but did not believe that the heretics should be executed. By the early sixteenth century their influence was on the wane. The militants were on the war-path, pointing to the fact that the heresy had not been eliminated by the blood-bath of 1504.

One of the texts which the 'Judaisers' used to support their teaching was the Book of Psalms. According to Archbishop Gennady, they doctored some of its passages for their own exegetical purposes.<sup>1</sup> It is hence not surprising that Maxim was put to work so soon on a translation of authoritative commentaries on the Psalms. It may indeed have been the main purpose of his invitation to Moscow.

Maxim took seventeen months to complete his task. This was the first of the many literary works he produced in Russia. The Soviet scholar Aleksey Ivanov, in a valuable study published in 1969, listed and briefly described 365 works attributable to Maxim, nearly half of them still unpublished at the time of writing.<sup>2</sup> The great majority are undated. They range over a wide variety of topics. Jack Haney, the author of the only book in English on Maxim, has divided them into four general categories: theology, secular philosophy, statecraft, and social problems.<sup>3</sup> The classification is useful, though it leaves out two important kinds of work: translations from the Greek (over 100 of them, mostly unpublished, are listed by Ivanov), and works on grammar and lexicography, fields in which Maxim was a pioneer in Russia. We badly need a critical edition of Maxim's writings. The only existing edition, published in Kazan in 1859-62, falls far short of this requirement.

Maxim seems to have had every reason to believe that, on completing his translation of the commentaries on the Psalter, he would be allowed to return to Mount Athos. Whether or not he was given a formal assurance to this effect,<sup>4</sup> the Muscovite

<sup>1</sup> Kazakova and Lur'e, *op. cit.*, pp. 310, 316, 319.

<sup>2</sup> Ivanov, *op. cit.* Cf. Sinitsyna, *op. cit.*, pp. 221-79.

<sup>3</sup> Haney, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> The monk Savvas of Vatopedi, the Muscovites' original choice (see above, p. 150), was given just such an assurance: Basil III of Moscow, in a letter to the *Protos* of Athos (the head of the Athonite community) dated 15 March 1515, stated that Savvas's services as a translator would be required only for a time, and that he would be sent back to Mount Athos on completion of his

authorities were clearly in no hurry to let him go home. They had other plans for Maxim. He was quickly put to work on further translations, and on the revision of the existing Slavonic texts of the Scriptures and liturgical books. These he found to be less than satisfactory: the earlier Russian translators had shown themselves deficient in their knowledge of Greek. This, Maxim observed with a touch of condescension, was hardly surprising. For the Greek language, he stressed, is difficult and complex, and requires many years of study to be mastered, especially if the student is not a Greek by birth, sharp-witted, and highly motivated.<sup>1</sup> It became obvious to him that the howlers committed by early translators, compounded by scribal errors, had led to mistranslations which at best were absurd, and at worst heretical. Some of the most glaring he corrected himself, unaware of the trouble he was storing up for the future.

It was not only by his correction of textual errors that Maxim sailed rather close to the wind. Through his contacts with local personalities he was becoming dangerously involved in public controversy. The first half of the sixteenth century was a period of great ferment in Muscovy: educated Russians seemed to be locked in endless and passionate debate. The momentous changes that were taking place in their society meant that they had indeed much to argue about: whether the sovereign was omnipotent, or should share his power with the aristocracy; whether heretics should be burned at the stake; what was the role of monasteries in the contemporary world; and what was the right relationship between church and state. The treatment of heretics, we have seen, was an issue over which the 'Josephians' and the 'Elders from beyond the Volga' clashed violently. We must now briefly examine another, closely related, issue, for it was to have a lasting effect on Maxim's fate.

During the late Middle Ages two different types of monasticism were prevalent in Russia. On the one hand, we find, mainly in the central areas, the large coenobitic house, owning land, often on task: 'Akty, kasayushchiesya do priezda Maksima Greka v Rossiyu', ed. M. A. Obolensky, *Vremennik Imperatorskogo Moskovskogo Obshchestva Istorii i Drevnostey Rossiyskikh*, v, 3 (Moscow, 1850), pp. 31-2. While there is no direct evidence that Maxim was given a similar promise, he doubtless regarded the Russians as morally bound by the undertaking they had given to Savvas. It is worth noting, furthermore, that the abbot of Vatopedi, in his letter recommending Maxim to the metropolitan of Moscow (see above, p. 150), requested that he and two other monks of his monastery, who were to travel to Moscow together, be eventually sent back to Athos 'in good health': *Akty istoricheskije*, i. 176.

<sup>1</sup> *Sochineniya*, iii. 80; cf. *ibid.*, p. 62; ii. p. 312; cf. Ikonnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

a large scale, exploiting peasant labour, practising works of charity and immersed in administrative and economic activity. This type of monastery came to be known as 'Josephian', after the name of Joseph, abbot of Volokolamsk, the leader of the hard-liners who wished to see the heretics physically destroyed. On the other hand, in the far north of the country, groups of small hermitages, known as *lavrai* in Greek and *skity* in Russian, clustered round clearings in the forest. Their monks came increasingly to believe that land-owning was incompatible with the monastic estate. It was in these remote *skity* that the contemplative tradition burned with a brighter flame; and the leaders of this movement, the very same 'Elders from beyond the Volga' who urged that heretics be treated leniently, became the spokesmen in late medieval Russia of the mystical teachings of Byzantine Hesychasm.<sup>1</sup>

The 'Josephian' party gained a notable victory in 1503, when Ivan III was compelled to abandon his plan for the secularization of church lands. Yet the 'Non-Possessors', as the opponents of monastic estates were also called, retained some influence in government circles, and when Maxim came to Moscow in 1518, they were still far from beaten. Their leader, Vassian Patrikeev, was a resourceful and vigorous campaigner. This former general and diplomat, who belonged to a princely family, was disgraced in 1499 and compelled to become a monk. A few years later he was back in Moscow, with a powerful influence over the new Grand Prince, Basil III.<sup>2</sup> Vassian and Maxim were to become close friends and associates.

When Maxim arrived in Moscow Vassian had just completed, with the approval of the Church, his main life-work, a new edition of the *Nomocanon*, The Orthodox manual of canon law. Arranged by subjects and no longer, as in previous editions, chronologically, Vassian's *Nomocanon* was intended to demonstrate that monasteries which owned landed estates were violating canon law. Maxim not surprisingly sided with the 'Non-Possessors', and placed his knowledge of Greek and experience of Mount Athos at the disposal of his new Russian friend. He was asked to arbitrate on a contentious problem of philology. The Greek *Nomocanon* permitted monasteries to own *προάστεια*, a word which in classical Greek means either 'suburbs' or 'houses or estates in suburbs'.

<sup>1</sup> See J. Meyendorff, *Une controverse sur le rôle social de l'Église. La querelle des biens ecclésiastiques au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle en Russie* (Chevetogne, 1956).

<sup>2</sup> See N. A. Kazakova, *Vassian Patrikeev i ego sochineniya* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1960).

Previous Russian translators had taken the word to mean 'villages with resident peasants', a translation which was vigorously endorsed by the 'Possessors'. Maxim, on the other hand, assured Vassian that the true meaning of *προάστεια* was 'ploughed fields and vineyards', which, by restricting the scope of the word, seemed to provide ammunition to the 'Non-Possessors'. This explanation was incorporated by Vassian into his edition of the *Nomocanon*.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, during his first years in Moscow, Maxim, at the request of Vassian, wrote several descriptions of the monasteries of Mount Athos.<sup>2</sup> He was careful to write in a non-polemical tone, and avoided any explicit reference to monastic landowning. Yet he made it clear that of the different types of Athonite monasteries he much preferred the coenobitic house, where all property was held in common and the monks supported themselves by their own labour. His accounts of Mount Athos were hardly calculated to please the 'Josephians'. As for his friendship with Vassian, it was soon to become a serious liability.

Their enemies doubtless carefully noted these words of Vassian who, unlike Maxim, was prone to overstatement: 'All our books are false ones, and were written by the devil and not by the Holy Spirit. Until Maxim we used these books to blaspheme God, and not to glorify or pray Him. Now, through Maxim, we have come to know God.'<sup>3</sup>

However cautious Maxim may have been in his public utterances, he seems to have behaved at times with a certain lack of elementary prudence. He allowed his cell in the Simonov Monastery to become a kind of dissident *salon*, where critics of Muscovite society, mostly members of the nobility, gathered to air their grievances.<sup>4</sup> This, in sixteenth-century Russia, was asking for trouble. Meanwhile, in the higher councils of church and state, his luck was running out. In 1522 the leader of the 'Possessors', Daniel, abbot of Volokolamsk and a disciple of Joseph, was appointed primate of the Russian Church; almost at once Vassian's influence at court began to wane.

Some time during the winter of 1524/5 Maxim was arrested. His arrest was followed in February 1525 by the trial of two of his

<sup>1</sup> See Ivanov, *op. cit.*, p. 51; Kazakova, *Vassian Patrikeev*, pp. 62, 236; Haney, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-8.

<sup>2</sup> *Sochineniya*, iii. 243-5; Ivanov, *op. cit.*, pp. 192-8; Sinitsyna, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> Ikonnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 409.

<sup>4</sup> See V. O. Klyuchevsky, *Kurs russkoy istorii*, ii: *Sochineniya*, ii (Moscow, 1957), 161-4.

regular visitors. Both these Russian associates of Maxim were charged with high treason, and found guilty. One was beheaded, the other sentenced to have his tongue cut out. In May 1525 Maxim himself was tried by a court presided over by the Grand Prince Basil III and by Metropolitan Daniel of Moscow, who also acted as chief prosecutor.

After a manifestly biased trial Maxim was sentenced to solitary confinement in the Volokolamsk Monastery (the stronghold of the 'Possessors'), put in chains, excommunicated, and allowed neither to read nor to write. His imprisonment was to last for twenty-three years. In 1531 he was tried again, at least partly because of his refusal to confess to the earlier charges, and was sentenced to imprisonment in a monastery in Tver'.<sup>1</sup>

The charges brought against him are known primarily from a near-contemporary document which Russian scholars have called the Trial Record (*Sudnyi Spisok*) of Maxim the Greek.<sup>2</sup> In fact it is not a copy of the proceedings but a literary pamphlet based on an official transcript of his trials. Until recently this document was known only in late and incomplete manuscripts. In 1968 a fuller version came to light, in a late sixteenth-century manuscript discovered in Siberia.<sup>3</sup> It has added much to our knowledge of Maxim's two trials. In one respect, however, this version is as deficient as the later ones. It combines materials relating to the two trials, and thus fails to distinguish between the charges brought against Maxim in 1525 and 1531. So for the present we too must be content with this unfortunate conflation.

The list of the charges is long and impressive. It included holding heretical views, practising sorcery, criticizing the Grand Prince, having treasonable relations with the Turkish government, claiming that the Russian Church's independence from the Patriarchate of Constantinople was illegal, and denouncing the monasteries and the church for owning land and peasants.

The allegation of sorcery was patently absurd, and merely shows the lack of scruples displayed by the prosecution, and particularly by the Metropolitan Daniel.<sup>4</sup> The accusation of heresy, equally unjust, was based on evidence no more substantial

<sup>1</sup> Ikonnikov, *op. cit.*, pp. 455-97; Sinitsyna, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-49; Haney, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-85.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion of this document, and other relevant sources, by N. A. Kazakova, *Ocherki po istorii russkoy obshchestvennoy mysli. Pervaya tret' XVI veka* (Leningrad, 1970), pp. 177-87.

<sup>3</sup> *Sudnye spiski Maksima Greka i Isaka Sobaki*, eds. N. N. Pokrovsky and S. O. Shmidt (Moscow, 1971); cf. Kazakova, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-93.

<sup>4</sup> Kazakova, *op. cit.*, pp. 230-1.

than some grammatical errors in Maxim's translations and occasional infelicities in his emendation of liturgical texts. These mistakes were due to his inadequate knowledge of the Russian language, a fault he readily acknowledged himself.<sup>1</sup> Criticism of the Grand Prince was a charge that Maxim denied: and it seems at the very least to have been unproven.<sup>2</sup>

The charge that Maxim entertained relations with the Ottoman government prejudicial to the Muscovite state raises more complex issues. At one or both of his trials he was accused of writing to the Turkish pasha of Athens, urging him to persuade the Sultan to declare war on Russia; and it was further alleged that he held secret meetings for the same purpose with the Turkish envoy in Moscow. Maxim vigorously denied these charges; and the recently discovered Siberian manuscript of the Trial Record makes it clear that no letters from him to the Ottoman authorities were available to the prosecution. The charges of treason and espionage could not be made to stick.<sup>3</sup> Yet a lingering suspicion remains that Maxim may have been less than discreet in his political table-talk. He admitted saying that one day the Sultan was bound to invade Russia, since he detested all members of the imperial house of Byzantium, from which Basil III of Moscow, through his mother, was descended.<sup>4</sup> As a Greek, Maxim hoped that one day the Muscovite sovereign, the most powerful Orthodox ruler on earth, would come to the help of his enslaved people and liberate them from the infidel yoke. A war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire was a necessary prelude to the liberation of the Christians of the Balkans. Maxim could hardly have concealed his irritation at the foreign policy of the Muscovite government which, faced with the hostility of the Polish-Lithuanian state and the constant military threat from the Tatar Khanates of the Crimea and Kazan', pinned its hopes on an alliance with the Ottoman Turks.

The last two charges against Maxim were straightforward, and mostly true. He never concealed his belief that the situation of the Russian Church, which had been electing its primates without reference to the Patriarch of Constantinople for almost a century, was uncanonical, and that it should return to the obedience of

<sup>1</sup> Kazakova, *op. cit.*, pp. 231-3; Haney, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-1.

<sup>2</sup> Kazakova, *op. cit.*, pp. 221-6.

<sup>3</sup> *Sudnye spiski Maksima Greka i Isaka Sobaki*, p. 44; Kazakova, *op. cit.*, pp. 203-21.

<sup>4</sup> *Sudnye spiski*, p. 70; Kazakova, *op. cit.* pp. 219-20.

its mother church.<sup>1</sup> Equally outspoken was his opposition to ownership of land by monasteries. He wrote repeatedly on this topic, denouncing Russian monks for accumulating lands and riches, exploiting their peasants, and practising usury.<sup>2</sup> He compared them unfavourably with the Carthusians, Franciscans, and Dominicans he had known in Italy, who led a life of dedicated poverty.<sup>3</sup> It was in this sensitive area of monastic ethics and economy that the Metropolitan Daniel and his minions must have felt the most threatened. In 1525, the year of Maxim's first trial, the 'Non-Possessors' were still a force to be reckoned with. It seems quite possible that Maxim's condemnation of monastic land-ownership was the main reason for the harshness of his sentence. And it is highly probable that one of the aims of his prosecutors in 1531 was to break Vassian Patrikeev. Almost at once Vassian was tried and sentenced to imprisonment in the Volokolamsk Monastery.<sup>4</sup> The condemnation in the same year of Maxim and his once powerful friend marked in a real sense the defeat of the 'Non-Possessors' party in Russia.

The harshness of Maxim's treatment slowly diminished in the 1530s, thanks to the humanity of the local bishop Akakiy, and especially after his chief tormentor, the Metropolitan Daniel, was removed from office in 1539. Though still at first deprived of communion, he was given his books back and allowed to write. In the mid-1540s the Patriarchs of Constantinople and Alexandria wrote to Ivan IV, requesting his release.<sup>5</sup> Maxim repeatedly begged his jailors to let him return to Mount Athos. The stony-hearted Russian authorities refused all his requests to be allowed to go home, at least once on the grounds that he knew too much about their country.<sup>6</sup>

In the last few years of Maxim's life his torments at last came to an end. He was released from imprisonment, probably about 1548, when the excommunication was lifted, and he was allowed to reside in St. Sergius's Monastery of the Holy Trinity near Moscow (in what today is Zagorsk). He spent his time reading, writing, and teaching. Despite his fading eyesight, he taught

<sup>1</sup> Kazakova, *op. cit.*, pp. 196–203; Haney, *op. cit.*, pp. 75–7, 82.

<sup>2</sup> *Sochineniya*, ii. 5–52, 89–118, 119–47, 260–76, iii. 178–205; Ivanov, *op. cit.*, pp. 156–60.

<sup>3</sup> 'Neizdannye sochineniya Maksima Greka', *Byzantinoslavica*, vi (1935–6), 85–109.

<sup>4</sup> N. A. Kazakova, *Vassian Patrikeev*, pp. 75–7.

<sup>5</sup> Ikonnikov, *op. cit.*, pp. 507–8.

<sup>6</sup> *Akty, sobrannye Arkheograficheskoyu Ekspeditsieyu*, i (St. Petersburg, 1836), 143; cf. E. Golubinsky, *Istoriya russkoy tserkvi*, ii (Moscow, 1900), 816.



Greek to a fellow monk, and wrote (a little earlier) to his chief persecutor, the Metropolitan Daniel, comforting him on his fall from power and offering him the hand of reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> He died in the Trinity Monastery, at the age of almost ninety.

The posthumous fate of Maxim the Greek in Russia was a curious one. His opinions on many matters of great concern to Russian society were too much at variance with official policy to make him fully acceptable, at least in the next few generations. It is true that the wonderful patience with which he endured twenty-three years of cruel torments caused him to be revered as a martyr, especially by those Russians who were at variance with the official church. He had, moreover, in his lifetime a small circle of Russian admirers, some of whom were outstanding men. It is perhaps surprising to find among them the Tsar Ivan the Terrible. It was on Ivan's orders that he was released from prison.<sup>2</sup> But it remains true that Maxim's influence in Russia was always very limited. It is remarkable that this Byzantine scholar was long revered in Russia for his statements on the correct way of making the sign of the cross, while his references to Greek classical literature were largely ignored.<sup>3</sup>

There may indeed be something symbolic in Maxim's Russian destiny. The rejection of a man who, in the depth of his spirituality and scholarship, typified what was best in the culture of post-Byzantine Greece, marked in one sense Russia's turning away from her ancient heritage of Byzantium.<sup>4</sup> It is true that, at the very time he was in Muscovy, the Russian churchmen were developing their egregious theory of Moscow the Third Rome, which ascribed to their capital city the role of focus of universal power and central repository for the true Orthodox faith. But Maxim's attitude to this theory seems to have been ambiguous. As a patriotic Greek, he welcomed the sixteenth-century version of the 'Great Idea'—the prospect of a victorious Russian entry into Constantinople, leading to the liberation of his people and their resurgence under the sceptre of an Orthodox tsar. In the introduction to his translation of commentaries on the Psalter, the very first work he carried out in Russia, Maxim addressed the Grand Prince of Moscow, Basil III, in these terms:

Let the poor Christians living there [in Greece] learn from us that

<sup>1</sup> *Sochineniya*, ii. 367–76; cf. Ikonnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 535; Haney, *op. cit.*, pp. 85–6.

<sup>2</sup> Sinitsyna, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

<sup>3</sup> I. Ševčenko, 'Byzantium and the Eastern Slavs after 1453', *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, ii (1978), 14.

<sup>4</sup> See G. Florovsky, *Puti russkogo bogosloviya* (Paris, 1937), pp. 22–4.

they still have a tsar, who not only rules over innumerable peoples and abounds in all else that is royal and is worthy of amazement, but who has been glorified above all others by reason of his justice and his orthodoxy, so that he may be likened unto Constantine and Theodosius the Great, whom your majesty succeeds. Oh, if only we could one day be liberated through you from subjection to the infidels and receive our own tsardom . . . So even now, may [God] be pleased to free the New Rome [Constantinople], cruelly tormented by the Godless Muslims, through the pious majesty of your tsardom, and to bring forth from your paternal throne an heir, and may we, the unfortunate ones, receive through you the light of freedom . . .<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps Maxim genuinely hoped that this rhetoric would advance the cause of his people's liberation. He wrote these words during his early days in Russia. His belief that Moscow, as the successor of Constantinople, was the third and last Rome, if it ever was sincere, soon foundered on the reality he saw around him. He was too much of a Byzantine at heart to be taken in for long by this meretricious substitute of the East Roman ecumenical idea, propounded in Russia by his sworn adversaries, the 'Josephian' monks. And he was probably too much of a realist not to observe how, in sixteenth-century Russia, through the narrowing of cultural horizons and in the wake of the *realpolitik* of its rulers, the Christian universalism of Byzantium was being transformed and distorted within the more narrow framework of Muscovite nationalism. Perhaps this is why Maxim's vision of the Christian commonwealth was, in the last resort, pessimistic. In a passage of pointed allegory, written in the early 1540s, he tells us that, toiling one day down a hard and wearisome road, he encountered a woman dressed in black, sitting by the roadside and weeping disconsolately. Around her were wild animals, lions and bears, wolves, and foxes. 'The road', she said to Maxim, 'is desolate and prefigures this last and accursed age'. Her name, she told him, was Vasileia (which in Greek means 'empire' or 'kingdom').<sup>2</sup>

It is not easy to assess precisely the place which should be allotted to Michael–Maximos–Maxim in the cultural history of each of the three worlds to which he belonged. Before this can be done satisfactorily we need, I think, a fuller answer to three questions: what was the nature of his Platonism, and how did he square it with his Christian beliefs? What led him to leave the

<sup>1</sup> *Sochineniya*, ii. 318–19. I have, in the main, followed the translation of this passage by Haney, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> *Sochineniya*, ii. pp. 319–37; cf. Haney, *op. cit.*, pp. 164–7.

Dominican order and retire to Mount Athos? And what impact did his writings have upon later Russian literature? In the meantime we can perhaps agree to accept the following conclusions: Maximos, though not a creative thinker, was at least a sound and wide-ranging scholar, with an excellent training in ancient philosophy and textual criticism; though he played an important role in the controversies that shook sixteenth-century Muscovite society, his learning was, with a few notable exceptions, above its head; and he lived in a cosmopolitan world where the Byzantine heritage, the late medieval Italo-Greek connections, and the traditional links between Russia, Mount Athos, and Constantinople were still to some extent living realities. He was one of the last of his kind.