

The Contribution of Byzantine Scholars to the Renaissance Process in Florence in the First Half of the 15th Century

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ABSTRACT

This paper shows the importance that the Byzantine culture had in the early Italian Renaissance genesis in Florence. During the Medici quattrocento period, there developed a major exile of Constantinople's intellectuals to Western Europe due to the unfavorable circumstances in their country. In the 15th century, Manuel Chrysoloras, Cardinal Bessarion, John Argyropoulos, and others popularised Greek in Florence and throughout Italy. The Platonic Academy of Florence (led by Marsilio Ficino and sponsored by Cosmo de Medici) had thousands of manuscripts previously brought by the Greek scholars. In their writings, the representatives of this Academy often agreed, in one form or another, on the Byzantine culture's contribution to the Renaissance.

INTRODUCTION

The History of the Byzantine Empire is an important chapter of historical literature. The idea that this "world" would have ended in May 1453 is false. It would be absurd to believe that an empire older than a millennium can end so quickly. The Dynasty of the Paleologus Emperors, Byzantine music, the quest for peace in Jesus' Prayer, the greatness of the Eastern liturgical ritual, is not just simple aspects of a migratory population but are the foundation of subsequent historical processes that will change the medieval world. Byzantium had a strong intellectual elite in the last century of its existence, until 1453, an elite who collaborated with both Western and Arabic intelligentsia. But what we are currently interested in is how these scholars have managed to endure after the dramatic year already mentioned. Many of them felt the collapse of Byzantium and therefore decided to leave permanently for a safe place abroad, in which they could continue their work.

Before the Renaissance in the West of Europe, some historians noted that there was a "Byzantine" rebirth, given the large number of Byzantines who empathised with Latin culture. Among them, we mention Demetrius Cydones (1324-1398), Prohor Cydones (1333-1370), Manuel Calecas (+1410), Manuel Chrysoloras (1350-1415), Maxim brothers (1410-1429), Teodor (+ before 1429), and Andrei Chrysoberges (+1456) and others. Although some of them converted to Catholicism, they remained Byzantine until the end of their lives. Archbishop Visarion of Nicea, converted to Catholicism under the name of Bessarion, becoming a cardinal, then a candidate for the pontifical seat, in 1455. This Cardinal Bessarion will lay the foundations of the prestigious Marciana Libraries in Venice, open even today. The year 2018 was called "Anno Bessarioneo" in the memory of its founder.

For some reason, the Byzantine scholars chose Florence, the capital of Tuscany, as a destination, which was in intense cultural, political and economic progress, being protected from imminent dangers. Promoters of humanism, such as Petrarch and Boccaccio, saw in these Greek emigrants the owners and “bearers of true classical culture,”¹ known to be the fact that these humanists took Greek lectures from Leontius Pilatus, and other Latin writers embraced Manuel’s Chrysoloras courses.

Although there have been many contacts between the West and the East, of a cultural, political, and religious nature, these connections are amplified towards the end of the 14th and early fifteenth centuries. A philosopher affirmed: “The political conditions in Italy favored the development of the humanist Renaissance, as princely, ducal, and ecclesiastical patrons were willing to spend large sums of money to purchase and copy manuscripts and to found libraries.”²

Thus, in 1396, Manuel Chrysoloras, the first true Greek teacher in the West, began his lectures in Florence. In 1397, Chrysoloras organized a Greek language school, and the grammar written by him was the first to appear in the West. For twenty years until his death, he taught Greek in both Florence and other cities. He was the first real teacher of Greek in Italy, the man with whom the revival of Greek learning in the West began. He lectured in Greek at Florence from 1397 to 1400. He was a Byzantine of good family who had previously visited Italy on a mission from the Emperor Paleologus, to seek aid against the Turks. Some cultivated Florentines, who had then met him, afterward prevailed on the Signoria of Florence to offer him the chair of Greek, which he accepted. He was a scholar, able to interpret the classical Greek poets and prose-writers, and he was eloquent. The enthusiasm created at Florence must have been remarkable. For the first time, Italians were placed in sympathy with the ancient Greek mind at its best. Ardent students, young and old, including several who afterward became eminent, crowded the lecture room. Leonardo Bruni said: “Chrysoloras of Byzantium... brought us Greek learning... I gave myself to his teaching with such ardour that my dreams at night were filled with what I had learned from him by day.”³

Chrysoloras’s presence in Florence contributed not only to facilitate the emigration of Greek scholars but also in attracting famous Latin scholars of the time to study the Greek language

¹ John Monfasani, “The Greeks and Renaissance Humanism”, in *Humanism in Fifteenth-Century Europe*, ed. David Rundle (Oxford: Medium Aevum: 2012), 31-78.

² Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum: 2003), 201.

³ *Ibidem*, 288.

and to discover ancient culture; for example, Leonardo Bruni from Arezzo abandoned his study of civil law, Pier Paolo Vergerio renounced at his career in Padua, and others left their jobs to dedicate themselves to Manuel Chrysoloras courses. Other disciples of the Byzantine scholar were also the humanists Roberto Rossi, Jacopo d'Angelo, Leonardo Bruni, Palla Strozzi, Uberto Decembrio, Cencio de Rustici, Guarino da Verona and Poggio Bracciolini.⁴

The best description of Manuel Chrysoloras's work in Florence was made by one of his students, Guarino da Verona, who compares his Byzantine master to the "sun that finally lights up in the darkness in centuries."⁵ The French historian Monnier said that Manuel Chrysoloras "is a true Greek, from Byzantium; he is noble, erudite, besides Greek, he also knows Latin; he is serious, sweet, religious... he is a master. He is the first Greek professor who, having renewed the classical tradition, occupied a chair in Italy."⁶

Manuel Chrysoloras arrived in Florence on February 2, 1397, after a year of negotiations to obtain a contract of 150 florins annually for five years. However, this amount rose to 250 the following year. The personality of the Greek teacher attracted many young intellectuals because they now had access to another level of wisdom. Chrysoloras has greatly simplified the traditional grammar and made a book, *Erotemata*, printed later in 1471.⁷ Besides this linguistic guidance, the teacher remained recognised for the large number of disciples he gathered. One of them was Guarino Veronese, who, in 1452, assembled a collection of texts in memory of his mentor, entitled "Chrysolorina."⁸ Guarino was a great lover of rhetoric, a highly valued art at this time, which he improved in Constantinople between 1403-1408 at Manuel's encouragement. Also of great importance in the history of Renaissance philosophy was Leonardo Bruni, one of Chrysoloras's students. As Masaccio appears in the painting between Giotto and Michelangelo, Bruni also is seated between Petrarch and Erasmus. After learning Greek, he also will translate religious works, such as the writings of St. Basil the Great about the importance of classical literature. This

⁴ Ivayla Popova, *Manuel Chrysoloras (1350-1415), Erudit et Diplomate Byzantin, et Sa Syncrisis* (Bulgaria: Études balkaniques: 1998), 153.

⁵ Ivayla Popova, *Manuel Chrysoloras...*, 154.

⁶ Philippe Monnier, *Le Quattrocento* (Paris: Librairie Academique Didier: 1901), 68.

⁷ Robert Proctor, *The Printing of Greek in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: Hildesheim: 1966), 34.

⁸ R. Sabbadini, *La scuola egli studi di Guarino Guarini Veronese* (Catania: Forgotten Books: 2018), 15.

translation of St. Basil the Great was greatly appreciated by circulating over 300 copies, and the work received the appellation of the “charter of liberal education.”⁹

Bessarion (1389-1472) owned the largest collection of Byzantine manuscripts, which he brought from Constantinople: nearly 1000 volumes, manuscripts, and copies, in Greek and Latin, authors most appreciated by humanists.¹⁰ These were invaluable works, which for more than a century later, were used as a source for the publishers and printers of Venetian books. Bessarion donated his library to the City of Venice (first fund of the future Marciana). Among the manuscripts, there were copies of the classics, Strabo, Pliny, Ptolemy, philosophical, religious, historical, geographical, poetic, scientific works. An inestimable wealth which contemporaries themselves understood to be great value.

Undoubtedly the most beloved and famous Byzantine scholar was Georgios Gemistos Plethon (1355-1452). In 1438, when he arrived in Florence, he presented himself as an 83-year-old man, tall and robust, whose appearance as a biblical patriarch or oriental magician - with white hair falling in the waves on his shoulders, with thick eyebrows covering deep eyes and glorious, with the long beard falling to his waist.¹¹ The Greek philosopher Basile Tatakis notes that Plethon found in Florence, a circle of people very eager to read Plato, in which they saw the symbol of freedom and knowledge. Plethon had responded to this need as well as possible through both his courses and his work on the difference between Plato and Aristotle. Under the influence of Plethon, Cosimo de Medici developed the Platonic Academy project, the first institution to represent the aspirations of modern times.¹²

Plethon’s thinking system is very complex. It often combines elements of Neoplatonic philosophy with Christian ones, takes on ideas of Plato and Zoroaster, and combines notions from the Stoics with mystical concepts. He develops a synthesis between ancient philosophies. For example, he mentions the Stoics, when he divides the soul into reason as a rational part, and feelings as an irrational part. His masterpiece “About Laws” proposes a series of social, political, moral and religious reforms to ensure happiness for man. Gemistos assimilates platonic ideas with

⁹ Leonardo Bruni, *San Basilio, Discorso ai Giovani* (Florența: Centro internazionale del libro: 1984), 22.

¹⁰ N. G. Wilson, *From Byzantium to Italy: Greek studies in the Italian Renaissance* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic: 2017), 58.

¹¹ P.P. Negulescu, *Filosofia Renașterii* (București: Editura Eminescu: 1986), 136.

¹² Basile Tatakis, *Filosofia bizantină* (București: Editura Nemira: 2010), 344

the angels and exalts the divinities of the Olympians, which he interprets as symbols of God's attributes. Plethon elaborates on theology that seeks to establish a connection between Christianity and the ancient philosophical traditions. It is interesting that when the old man appeared in the gardens of Cosimo de Medici, in the circle of literati gathered around him, began to talk about Plato's philosophy, a young enthusiasm encompassed them the whole being, giving to his venerable, octogenarian look of time, an apostle. Looking beyond the heads of his listeners, he was contemplating a world unseen by them, the world of eternal ideas.

In public speeches, the audience was enchanted by the Byzantine orator. Among those who particularly appreciated these was Cosimo de Medici, the most famous person in Italy, given his notoriety in economic, political and financial areas. Listening carefully to Gemistos Plethon, Cosimo decided to establish a Platonic Academy in Florence, which came to be a reality after several years, under the direction of Marsilio Ficino. Analysing the Renaissance process in the West carefully, we can see the historical importance of Byzantines activity in Florence.

Although it was made up of scholars, the Academy was still an atypical society. It had no administrative office, no statutes, no membership registers. They did not hold regular meetings and did not record what was discussed or decided verbally. Members did not submit annual reports before the general assemblies of all its members. They did not publish periodicals, bulletins, or annals to communicate to the world the results of their work. The French scientist Philippe Monnier will point out that the Plato Academy in Florence was more a doctrine than a school, more a religion than a church.¹³ What held them united was the common interest for the impartial love they had for Plato's writings. This love had nothing unclean or impure, but has a positive, enthusiastic mood, and attracts its members to simplicity, to poverty, and piety. Marsilio Ficino, the leader of this academy, became a priest after 40 years, cultivating friendly relationships with the famous contemporary monk, Girolamo Savonarola.

Another personality of the time was Bessarion, archbishop of Nicea. He accompanied the Byzantine Emperor to the Council, and always proclaimed himself in favour of the union. He was involved in the Renaissance process in Italy and became Cardinal of the Roman Church, a function he accepted. Because his residence in Rome became the meeting place of the humanists, he was called "latinorum graecissimus, graecorum latinissimus," meaning the most Greek of Latins and

¹³ Philippe Monnier, *Le Quattrocento* (Paris: Librairie Academique Didier: 1901), 81.

the most Latin of the Greeks. For his theological, literary and philosophical writings, Cardinal Bessarion, who occupied very high positions even within the Western Church, was described by the French historian Henri Vast as follows: “Bessarion lived on the threshold between two eras. Greek at the beginning, he became Latin ... a cardinal who protects scholars, a scholastic theologian who pleads for Platonism ... who contributed more than anyone to the birth of the modern age”¹⁴ But yet we must underline the idea that he remains a Byzantine even as a Roman cardinal, and so belongs in a particular way to the history of the Byzantine Church. He places his library at the disposal of the Byzantine emigration in its center in Venice, without distinguishing between the Orthodox and the Catholics.

Bessarion was one of the brightest and most glorious apostles of Byzantium, being the protector of the fellow citizens who brought their language and literature from Constantinople and the Hellenic East. Henri Vast writes the most profound and broadest description of Cardinal Bessarion’s work, considering him to be the one who saw the “first manuscripts translated and printed in Latin,”¹⁵ correcting with his own hand, his palace becoming an academy. Vast has an important chapter in dealing with the importance of Bessarion in the Renaissance under Pope Paul II’s pontificate.

Another scholar among the Greeks in Florence was Ioannis Argyropoulos (1415-1487). He had famous disciples, both in Constantinople and in Italy. He remains famous for being a master of Leonardo da Vinci for a while. Argyropoulos was born in Constantinople in 1415 and died in Rome in 1487. While in Italy, he taught at the Universities of Padua, Florence, and Rome. Among his students were Peter and Lorenzo de Medici, nicknamed “The Magnificent.” This was the result of Cosimo de Medici being associated with our Byzantine tradition and is why he preferred Argyropoulos to be the master of his grandsons. Although Argyropoulos attended the Council of Ferrara-Florence and translated many Greek-Latin texts, his most important feature remains to be a teacher in Florence.¹⁶

¹⁴ Henri Vast, *Le cardinal Bessarion* (Paris: Hachette et Cie: 1878), 81.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 158.

¹⁶ Deno John Geanakoplos, *Constantinople and the West* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press: 1989), 91.

CONCLUSION

The migration of Byzantine scholars to Italy changed, in a way, the view of Western – Europe philosophy and produced an unexpected cultural revolution. By returning to the sources of ancient literature, we can open minds and hearts, and we can get answers to essential questions. The contribution of Byzantine scholars remains undiscovered today, but we hope that current researchers will consider their effort and sacrifice.

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