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Still more on the political views of Bessarion

An imposing universal figure, Bessarion, metropolitan of Nicaea and in later life a cardinal of the Catholic Church, was undoubtedly one of the most important personalities of the 15th century. He played a key role in the renewal of intellectual life in Italy, offering the western community the benefit of his own special perspective on the world and, along with other Byzantine men of letters, familiarising Western Europe with what has aptly been called ‘Proto-Europe’, i.e. the thousand-year-old Byzantine Empire¹. The nature of Bessarion’s conduct and deeds in general have tended to create an ideologically loaded picture as regards his political conscience: his actions lay beyond the normal pattern of the Byzantine or Western world, suggesting a broader European synthesis. According to his contemporary, the Italian humanist, Lorenzo Valla, Bessarion was “in Rome the most Latin of the Greeks and in Constantinople the most Greek of the Latins” (*Latinorum graecissimus, Graecorum latinissimus*),² while Bessarion’s protégé, the scholar and scribe Michael Apostoles, considered the cardinal to be among the “last of the Greeks” and the “first of the Europeans” (*ἐν τῶν Γραικῶν τοῖς ὑστάτοις κἀντοῖς πρώτοις τῶν Εὐρωπαϊῶν*).³ Modern scholars have since emphasized from time to time either the Greek or the Latin dimension of his personality. His decision to embrace the Latin Church and his stance on the issue of the union of the churches explains why western historiography so frequently included Bessarion among the ranks of the Latin humanists.⁴ On the other hand, his unionist convictions and the hue and cry raised against him by those of his countrymen who were strongly opposed to the union led to the neglect of many aspects of his life in the Greek historiography, though of course there was no shortage of works seeking to stress beside the Latin the Greek Bessarion.⁵

But living, as he did, between these two worlds, how did Bessarion see himself? Scholars have long focused on the Byzantines’ views of their own

¹ D.A.Zakythinos, “Τό πρόβλημα τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς συμβολῆς εἰς τήν Ἀναγέννησιν”, in *Μεταβυζαντινά καί Νέα Ἑλληνικά*, Athens 1978, pp.242- 243.

² D.J. Geanakoplos, *Interaction of the “ Sibling ” Byzantine and Western Cultures in the Middle Ages and Italian Renaissance (330-1600)*, New Haven and London 1976, p. 217.

³ *Lettres inédites de Michel Apostolis*, ed. H.Noiret, Paris 1889, p.76.

⁴ For instance the *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, v. 9, Roma 1967, contains an entry on *Bessarione*. Cfr. also the studies of J.Monfasani entitled “Bessarion Latinus”, *Rinascimento* 21,2 (1981), a, 165-209, and «Still more on “Bessarion Latinus”», *Rinascimento* 23,2 (1983), b, 217-235.

⁵ Suffice is to mention the study of A.Kyrou, *Βησσαρίων ὁ Ἕλληνας*, v.1- 2, Athens 1947.

origin, and on the efforts of the Empire's subjects to interpret pertinent terms and to consolidate specific ideas.⁶⁾ It is well known that while in line with the ecumenical ideology of Byzantium, the Byzantines continued to refer to themselves as 'Romans' until their state ceased to exist, they proved ever more willing to accept their Greek lineage as the Empire gradually fell into decline. It is worth mentioning two typical theories expounded a century earlier by Demetrios Cydones and Manuel Chrysoloras, eminent scholars of their time, which contribute to the comprehension of Bessarion's views on his own national identity. For his part, Cydones considered himself a genuine Roman, a colonist from old Rome, a city he viewed as indivisible from the new Rome, Constantinople, the two cities being joined together as colony and metropolis⁷⁾. Manuel Chrysoloras took this argument a step further. His theory stated that there were two wise and powerful nations in the world: the Romans and the Greeks. The Romans prevailed in his own times; the Greeks had prevailed in an earlier period. These two prudent nations had together selected the site for the new city, Constantinople, considering it worthy of their aspirations, and a place from which they could dominate the whole world. Moreover, in his Discourse addressed to the Byzantine Emperor, in the part entitled 'A plea for the nation' (*Παράκλησις ὑπέρ τοῦ Γένους*), Chrysoloras expresses a political theory wherein the Byzantines are identified with both Greeks and Romans. In his view, the descent of his nation runs in a straight line from ancient Greece through the hellenistic and Roman ages to Byzantium.⁸⁾

Chrysoloras' conception of the Greco-Roman inheritance of Byzantium was no longer current during Bessarion's era. Like other Byzantine scholars of the age, Bessarion recognised only the Greek ancestry of his Roman countrymen. In a note of possession, attributed to his own hand, on a manuscript he donated to the Grottaferrata monastery, Bessarion records that he was "cardinal by rank, Greek by descent" (*καρδινάλεως τήν ἀξίαν, τό γένος Ἑλληνας*).⁹⁾ Bessarion's views on the cultural heritage of Hellenism and the modernization of Byzantine society during its last years, as well as on the survival of the Greek

⁶ See among others P. Gounaridis, "Γένος Ρωμαίων": *Βυζαντινές και νεοελληνικές ἐρμηνεῖες*, Athens 1996.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 15.

⁸ ... *καί εἴτε Ἑλληνας βούλοιτό τις λέγειν εἴτε Ρωμαίους, ἡμεῖς ἐσμέν ἐκεῖνοι καί τήν Ἀλεξάνδρου δέ καί τῶν μετ' ἐκεῖνον ἡμεῖς σώζομεν διαδοχήν...* (*Manuel Chrysoloras and his Discourse addressed to the Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus*, introd. and ed. of the text Chr. G. Patrinelis- D. Z. Sofianos, Athens 2001, pp. 27 and 117 v. 4-13; cf. Chryssa A. Maltezou, "An Enlightened Byzantine Teacher in Florence: Manuel Chrysoloras", *Orthodoxy and Oecumene. Gratitude Volume in Honor of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartolomaios I*, Athens 2001, p. 445). On Chrysoloras and his cultural contribution see the recent publication *Manuele Crisolora e il ritorno del greco in Occidente. Atti del Convegno Internazionale (Napoli, 26-29 giugno 1997)*, a cura di R. Maisano and A. Rollo, Napoli 2002.

⁹ *Bessarione e l' Umanesimo*. Catalogo della mostra (Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana), a cura di G. Fiaccadori, Napoli 1994, p. 385.

nation following the death of Byzantium, are of particular interest to the historian investigating the development of the ideas current among Byzantines who experienced at first hand the turbid final years of the empire and the period immediately after the fall of Constantinople. I shall try to present these aspects in my paper.

As Byzantium inexorably neared its end, Bessarion clung on to a vision: that the Empire could be saved by social reform, based, on the one hand, on a revival of classical culture, and, on the other, on technological advances. In his letter addressed to Constantine Palaeologus, Despot of Mystra, in 1444, he clearly reveals the extent to which his views had been influenced by the teachings and theories of Gemistus Plethon.¹⁰⁾ With an unshakable faith in the ethical values of Hellenism, he proposed a series of reforms that he believed would lead to a well-governed state, capable of confronting the problems it faced in those extremely difficult times. Plato's influence can be seen in his pronouncement that the meritorious should rule, rather than the rich;¹¹⁾ indeed, he did not hesitate to write to Constantine Palaeologus himself that although the latter had not been a philosopher when he had ascended to the throne, he had nevertheless succeeded in becoming one during his reign. This identification of the governor with the philosopher is clearly a reference to the wise men to whom Plato would entrust power.¹²⁾ The nation ("γένος") of the Hellenes, wrote Bessarion, is mild by nature, assiduous, virtuous, brave, courteous, imitates what is good, and inclined to learning.¹³⁾ The Empire's rulers were to blame for its decline, and these same princes therefore owed it to their citizens to show them the way to prosperity. There was an urgent need to introduce laws that addressed the needs that had arisen along with the new conditions prevailing in Byzantine society, and for luxury to be banished from every sphere of public and private life. The

¹⁰⁾ The letter from Bessarion to the despot Constantine Palaeologus has been published by Sp. Lampros, *Παλαιολόγεια και πελοποννησιακά*, v. 4, Athens 1930, pp. 32-45 and has been discussed on numerous occasions. See D.A.Zakythinos, *Le despotat grec de Morée*, v.2 : *Vie et institutions*, ed. revue et augmentée par Chryssa Maltezo, Variorum, London 1975, pp.356-358; L.Mavrommatis, "Ο καρδινάλιος Βησσαρίων και ο εκσυγχρονισμός της Πελοποννήσου", *Symmeikta* 9 (1994) = *Μνήμη Δ. Α. Ζακυθινού*, 41-50, and especially A.Pardos, "Οι άξονες της ιδεολογίας του Νέου Έλληνισμού στην άλλη Κωνσταντινούπολη. Η παρακαταθήκη του Βησσαρίωνα: Λάσκαρης και Μουσοῦρος ανάμεσα στους Έλληνες της Βενετίας", *Άνθη Χαρίτων*, a cura di N.Panagiotakes, Venice (Hellenic Institute of Byzantine and Postbyzantine Studies) 1998, pp. 546 - 558.

¹¹⁾ Γνώτωσαν άρετην τιμώμενοι, ου πλούτω οι άνθρωποι: μή πλουτίνδην, άλλ' άριστίνδην επί τας άρχάς εκλεγέσθωσαν... (Lampros, *Παλαιολόγεια*, op. cit., p. 38).

¹²⁾ Και γάρ, ει μή φιλόσοφος γεγονώς έβασίλευσας, αλλά βασιλεύς ών έφιλοσόφεις τε και φιλοσοφών ου πάντη (Lampros, *Παλαιολόγεια*, op. cit., p. 40, cf. Pardos, "Οι άξονες", op. cit., 556 and n.135).

¹³⁾ Ημερον την φύσιν τό τών Έλλήνων έστι γένος, έπιμελητικόν άρετης, μιμητικόν του καλου, φύσει γενναϊόν τε και φιλότιμον, προς πάσαν παιδείαν έτοιμόν τε και πρόχειρον (Lampros, *Παλαιολόγεια*, op. cit., p. 40, Mavrommatis, "Ο καρδινάλιος", op. cit., p. 49).

Peloponnesians, wrote Bessarion, both men and women, should desist from dissipation, reduce the amount of gold and silver adorning their garments, and moderate their use of luxury tableware, the number of maids and servants in their employ, the frequency with which they organised luxurious feasts, celebrations, weddings, and funerals, and the sumptuousness of their households.¹⁴⁾

Bessarion was also distressed by the illiteracy that was widespread among the Greeks. It was saddening, he noted, that the people who had given science, art, and knowledge to the world were now uneducated and ignorant. He proposed that the governor remedy this sad situation by sending young men to study in Italy; on their return to Greece, they could instruct their countrymen. He did not consider it demeaning in any way for the Greeks to import knowledge from the West, since the Latins had not hesitated to take what they had lacked from the Greeks. As he wrote, it is not as if we would be taking anything foreign; we would simply be laying claim to our own heritage from those who owe it to us.¹⁵⁾ At this point in the letter, Bessarion presents us with a summary of his views on his own ancestry and the relation between Greek and Western culture. The old theory of Greco - roman identity propounded, as we have already mentioned, by scholars as eminent as Cydones and Chrysoloras, in the fourteenth century, according to which Constantinople was the joint creation of the fortunate citizens of two homonymous cities, the Old and the New Rome, had been abandoned, since it no longer served the ideological anxieties of the intellectuals of the time. It is worth noting that in his letter to Constantine Palaeologus, Bessarion does not use the terms ‘Romans’ or ‘Greeks’, but only the term ‘Hellenes’. Moreover, his use of the first person plural, ‘we’ ‘ἡμεῖς’, (‘ἡμέτεροι’, ‘ἡμέτερα’) can leave us in no doubt that Bessarion considered himself to be descended from the “γένος” of the Hellenes.¹⁶⁾ However, the “Roman” and the “Hellenic” nation were not alien to one other ; the two nations were interconnected vessels containing common humanistic values that led to a single civilization. The Greek literary tradition was linked to the Latin, and it was only through dialogue that the two classical languages could derive nourishment from one another. If the Greeks were once the bearers of civilization, it was now the turn of the Latins to give back to the Greeks the wisdom they had received from them in the past. The two cultural traditions were equal and mutually complementary.

The sphere of education and learning could not be divorced from its social context. Bessarion was familiar with the products new technology had made

¹⁴⁾ Cf. Zakythinis, *Le despotat grec*, op. cit., p. 357, Mavrommatis, “Ο καρδινάλιος”, op. cit., pp. 43-47, Pardos, “Οἱ ἄξονες”, op. cit., p. 555 and n.130.

¹⁵⁾ ‘Ἡμεῖς δέ οὐδέ ἀλλότριόν τι ληψόμεθα, ἀλλὰ τὰ αὐτῶν παρά τῶν ὀφειλόντων ἀποληψόμεθα· ὀφείλουσι γάρ ὄντως τοῦ ἀπαιτοῦντος ἀποδοῦναι ἅμῃ ἀπέλαβον, ἀλλὰ ἔλαβον (Lampros, *Παλαιολόγεια*, op. cit., p. 40, cf. Zakythinis, *Le despotat grec*, op. cit., p. 357, Mavrommatis, “Ο καρδινάλιος”, op. cit., p. 50, Pardos, “Οἱ ἄξονες”, op. cit., p. 554).

¹⁶⁾ Mavrommatis, “Ο καρδινάλιος”, op. cit., p. 49.

available in pre-capitalist Europe, and did everything he could to persuade his countrymen to seize upon Western know-how in the fields of engineering and iron-working and apply it to the making of weapons and building of boats in the Empire. He goes on to list a further four skills: the production of glass, silk, textiles, and wool and silk dyes, though the development of these was not so urgent, since they were connected with frivolity and luxury, and not with the Byzantines' primary needs. It was Bessarion's opinion that sending between four and eight young men to Italy would enable the Peloponnesians to learn these new arts; having himself supervised their education in these new technologies, they could return home and share their knowledge with others. The young men's mission should be kept a secret, since the Italians might otherwise attempt to prevent them acquiring Western know-how. The cardinal himself would use his own position and influence to help them, and bring them into contact with those experts and organizations from whom they would best acquire a technical education.¹⁷ These proposed reforms reveal that the Byzantine scholar still harboured hopes that it would be possible to modernize the empire, to render it economically and technologically self-sufficient, and to mirror the development of the Italian city-states, then enjoying a period of growth and prosperity. In Bessarion's view, the way forward lay in embracing the West and its achievements, and combining Greek thought with a Latin education. However, this orientation towards Western Europe and closer contact with the Latins did not in any way mean that the 'Hellenic nation' should feel at a disadvantage in their dealings with the Romans, or, indeed, that the Greeks were running the risk of losing their identity through contact with foreigners. In simple terms, since wisdom, once the domain of the Greeks, had moved West and was now in Latin hands, the Greeks would have to hurry, if they wished to make it theirs once more.

Bessarion's realistic programme of reform and national invigoration, which was aimed at saving a Byzantine region that still had the strength to recover, was never put into practice. A decade later, the Byzantine capital ceased to exist. This momentous event deeply marked Bessarion's life and works. Having experienced the dramatic disintegration of Byzantium, he believed that the Christian West had an obligation to unite against Turkish expansionism, and was to spend the rest of his days vainly attempting to break through the indifference of the Christian powers and persuade the leaders of Europe to undertake an expedition against the Turks. While Bessarion had never missed an opportunity to express his concern about the level of education that prevailed among his countrymen

¹⁷ Zakythinos, *Le despotat grec*, op. cit., p. 358, Mavrommatis, "Ο καρδινάλιος", op. cit., pp. 47-48, Pardos, "Οἱ ἄξιοι", op. cit., pp. 549-550 and n. 104. See also D.J. Geanakoplos, "A Byzantine looks at the Renaissance", *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 1 (1958), 157-162, A.G. Keller, "A Byzantine admirer of 'western' progress": Cardinal Bessarion, *Cambridge Historical Journal* 11 (1953-1955), 343-348, I. Sevčenko, "The decline of Byzantium as seen by its intellectuals" *DOP* 15 (1961), 177.

prior to the great catastrophe, his belief in the importance of education was even more adamant after it: only through education could “our nation” take back what it had lost. One can therefore understand the alarm that seized him at the prospect of the dismemberment of the Greek educational heritage under the Turks. One can also understand that by the donation of his precious library to Venice he believed that he had guaranteed the survival of the Greek culture.¹⁸⁾

His efforts to secure a future for the ‘Romans’ who would henceforth, of necessity, be living within a new political reality, show that Bessarion’s concern was not limited to the continuance of Greek civilization. Not only did he transform his own home into a centre where refugees, who had fled the Turks and sought protection in the West, could find both shelter and solace, but it was probably also Bessarion who conceived of a truly visionary idea: the creation of a Greek state in Tuscany for refugees from a subjugated Greece. The plan provided for the building of a settlement, with the permission of the Sienese authorities, in Montauto Castle in Maremma, and that Anna Notara, daughter of Loukas, the Grand Duke of Constantinople, would cover the transportation and installation costs of the refugee families, whose number was initially to be limited to a hundred.¹⁹⁾ Comparing the articles of this plan, which dates from between 1471 and 1474, with Bessarion’s proposals for the modernization of the Peloponnese, in 1444, one can realize that the two texts are inspired by the same conception. Both talk of a civil and not a religious community as well as a self-governing society with its own legal system. For instance, the plan proposing the foundation of the Greek colony in Tuscany includes a clause stating that the refugees would live in accordance with the laws of Justinian and the customs of the Byzantines (*secundum eorum mores et consuetudines*),²⁰⁾ but that either they themselves or their rulers would have the right to modify the legislation, given, of course, that they considered it necessary to do so.²¹⁾ Laws, as Bessarion stressed in his letter to Constantine, should be open to change so as to best respond to the needs of the social reality at any given time. Only God’s laws, he writes, are immutable.²²⁾ It should also be added that just as his letter of 1444 to

¹⁸⁾ On the donation of Bessarion’s library to Venice see M. Zorzi, *La libreria di San Marco. Libri, lettori, società nella Venezia dei Dogi*, Milano 1987.

¹⁹⁾ The documentary evidence relating to the settlement of Greeks in Tuscany has been published and analysed by C. Calisse, “Montauto di Maremma. Notizie e documenti”, *Bullettino Senese di Storia Patria* 1896, 177- 221, and G. Cecchini, “Anna Notara Paleologa. Una principessa greca in Italia e la politica senese di ripopolamento della Maremma”, *Bullettino Senese di Storia Patria* 34 (1938), 1-41. Later research has not shed any further light on the matter.

²⁰⁾ Calisse, “Montauto”, 213.

²¹⁾ ... *et ministret iustitiam cuicumque iustinianas leges et secundum eorum mores et consuetudines ac reformationes per grecorum imperatores editas seu per hoc dominos seu per dictos habitatores edendas...* . (Calisse, “Montauto”, 213).

²²⁾ *Τοῖς θείοις γάρ τοῦτο μόνον νόμοι ἀποδοτέον, οἱ πρός πάντα καιρόν τε καί πράγματα χρήσιμοι τέθεινται. Τούς δέ γε ἀνθρωπίνους νόμους, πρός τά ἐκάστοτε ἐνεστῶτα πράγματα καί*

the despot of Mystra there is a reference to an economically independent Peloponnese, reliant on its own resources, in the same way in the plan for the Tuscan colony there is a mention of utilizing the land to produce products that would cover the needs of the population and ensure economic self-sufficiency.

The plan, which aimed to create a Greek city-state on Italian soil, that could then develop along the lines of other Italian cities, did not in the end succeed. The reasons why it was never implemented remain unclear, and are certainly beyond the scope of this paper. I would simply like to note that Anna Notara, who was to have supported the plan financially, appears to have shared Bessarion's view that the long and difficult road to the rebirth of the nation would necessarily be by way of education; hence the connection of her name with the masterly edition of the *Mega Etymologicon*, printed in Venice in 1499.²³ Finally, it was in this city, rather than Siena, that the Greeks succeeded in forming a distinct ethnic minority, successfully overcoming the difficulties faced by refugees and developing new forms of expression. And it is surely no coincidence that it was none other than Venice – the city that was gradually to become the notional capital of Hellenism, the *altera patria* of the Greeks – which wise Bessarion came to consider a 'second Constantinople'.

τούς τότε καιρούς ἀρμοζομένους, τῶν πραγμάτων μεταβαλλομένων, κάκείνους μεταβάλλεσθαι πάντως ἀνάγκη (Lampros, *Παλαιολόγεια*, op. cit., p. 38, cf. Mavrommatis, “Ο καρδινάλιος”, op. cit., p. 46).

²³ Evro Layton, *The Sixteenth Century Greek Book in Italy. Printers and publishers for the Greek World*, Venice 1994, pp. 318-321.