THE ROLE OF GREEK ÉMIGRÉS IN EAST-WEST CULTURAL COMMUNICATION BEFORE AND AFTER THE FALL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

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In the Hellenistic, Roman and late Antique periods, the cities of the eastern Mediterranean were repositories of accumulated knowledge. Pergamum, Ephesus, Athens and Antioch all had their libraries and the greatest of all was that of Alexandria, whose library allegedly contained 490,000 papyrus rolls. These libraries housed the vast corpus of ancient Greek literature, which ranged from philosophy to medicine and from history to plays. By the end of the 7th century, however, all those cities had suffered hostile sack or takeover as the eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) shrank drastically. Alexandria was captured by the Arabs in 642 and in the course of the takeover the library burned down and was lost forever. That left Constantinople, the capital of the empire, as the only Christian city where ancient Greek literature was preserved and studied. It survived, thanks to its impregnable defences, at least until 1204, when the Fourth Crusade captured the city.

It needs to be clarified here exactly what was preserved in Constantinople. It was not that the city was an island of Hellenic learning in a sea of barbarism. Ancient Greek philosophy and medicine were avidly studied in the Islamic caliphate. There is also some evidence for its study, in a much more limited way, in the early medieval west. The difference was that in Constantinople the texts were studied with an intimate knowledge of the Ancient Greek language. Islamic and western scholars almost all used Arabic or Latin translations. In the west, moreover, only a very limited number of Greek texts were available even in translation. It was this continued knowledge of the Greek language that made the difference. The continuity was not absolute. The spoken Greek language changed radically in the Byzantine period, moving away from the Attic Greek of the Classical period towards what has become Demotic or Modern Greek. The ancient language, however, remained the literary idiom and knowledge of it was a precondition for employment in the imperial civil service. Therefore a system of higher education continued throughout the Byzantine period. It was designed for laymen, not clerics, and taught them how to read ancient Greek texts and to write in the same style. Consequently, there was a constant demand for Classical texts so that the earliest complete surviving copies of them are those produced in Constantinople in the Byzantine period (Wilson, 1996, pp. 1-60).

That leads on naturally to the topic of this paper: Constantinople's role as communicator of this cultural legacy of ancient Greek language and literature, which it preserved for so long. It fulfilled that role to some extent for the Islamic world. Byzantine emperors regularly sent manuscripts of the Greek classics to Muslim rulers as diplomatic gifts. When it came to the Latin west it was more difficult. Here there was something of a dialogue of the deaf. Byzantine intellectuals were well trained in Greek but they were almost completely ignorant of Latin. Similarly, ancient Greek was almost unknown in western Europe, where secular education essentially ceased to exist between the 5th and 12th centuries. There was accordingly neither an ability on the part of the Byzantines to communicate or of westerners to receive the information.

In the later Middle Ages the situation changed as a result of the decline of the Byzantine empire, which was shrinking rapidly in the face of the advance of the Ottoman Turks. One of the main imperial policies in response to the decline was to try to secure help from the Christian west against the common Muslim enemy. It now became extremely important for Byzantine intellectuals to learn Latin so as to be able to negotiate this matter with western rulers. In the course of this active diplomacy, these individuals were also to become cultural communicators. The most famous example of this link between diplomacy and cultural communication is Manuel Chrysoloras. Chrysoloras had been through the Byzantine course of higher education so he knew his ancient Greek and the Greek classics very well, but he also knew Latin and was therefore an obvious person to be sent to the west bearing the appeals of the Byzantine emperor. He spent most of the second half of his life on this errand. He died in 1415 at the Council of Constance, where he had gone to present the Byzantine case to the assembled delegates (Barker, 2009).

Chrysoloras's diplomacy failed in the end because no large-scale western help was dispatched to Constantinople. His cultural impact was much greater. In 1396, he was invited to teach Greek at the University of Florence, the so-called *Studium*. He only stayed there three years but in that time he had made an enormous impression. Among his pupils were some of the foremost figures of the revival of Greek studies in Renaissance Italy, including Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444), Guarino da Verona (1374-1460) and Pallas

Strozzi (1372-1462). His teaching of Greek was carefully graded, beginning with prose authors before moving onto the poets. He also wrote a simplified Greek grammar, which cut through many of the complexities presented in traditional grammar books and made it easier to learn. He is a perfect example of a cultural communicator (Wilson, 1992, pp. 8-12).

Chrysoloras was by no means the only Byzantine cultural communicator. As the 15th century progressed, more and more Byzantine intellectuals settled permanently in the west. The impetus for them to do so was continuing Ottoman pressure, which culminated in 1453 when Sultan Mehmed II (1451-1481) succeeded in conquering Constantinople. Many people headed west as refugees from the catastrophe (Harris, 1995, pp. 16-21, pp. 119-31). Again, to take just one example, John Argyropoulos (d.1487), was, like Chrysoloras, one of the highly educated Byzantine elite, someone who also knew Latin and was sent on diplomatic missions to the west. After the fall of Constantinople, he managed to reach Italy and in 1456 he was appointed to the chair of Greek at the *Studium* in Florence, the same post that Chrysoloras had held. In the past there was a myth that Greek studies in the Renaissance were somehow 'started' by émigrés like Argyropoulos. That has now been shown not to be the case. The Italians had already begun the study of Greek quite independently (Burke, 1996). There can be no doubt, however, that Argyropoulos had a great impact. One important aspect of his teaching of philosophy was his choice of philosopher. Although personally an Aristotelian who accepted the traditional, scholastic interpretations of Aristotle's philosophy, in his private teaching Argyropoulos gave instruction in the works of Plato. His exposition of Plato proved to be so effective that many of his students transferred their interest from rhetoric to Plato's metaphysical philosophy. This was to have important long term consequences for the development of Florentine political thought (Wilson, 1992, pp. 86-90).

There are many other examples of the impact of Byzantine émigrés. The obvious one is Cardinal Bessarion, a Byzantine bishop who converted to Catholicism and became a prominent member of the Roman curia. Bessarion never taught Greek as Chrysoloras and Argyropoulos did. Rather, he promoted the copying of Greek books, which in the days before printing was the only way of replicating them. Bessarion was acutely aware that many of these works were in danger of being lost forever, and he generously paid for some eight hundred of them to be copied by scribes, who were often refugees from Constantinople. In 1468, Bessarion donated this collection to the church of St Marks in Venice because he believed that they would be safe there. These books were used after his death to produce early printed editions of the Greek classics. Thus there is a direct link between Bessarion's library and the modern editions of the classics that exist today, making this a perfect case of cultural communication (Geanakoplos, 1962; Lowry, 1979).

The next question that arises is how far this cultural communication from Constantinople was dispersed. After all, the three examples mentioned so far, Chrysoloras, Argyropoulos and Bessarion, all had their impact on Italy. A country such as France, where Greek studies were much slower to develop, might be thought to have missed out on any Byzantine influence. Both Chrysoloras and Argyropoulos are known to have visited France in the course of their travels but there is no evidence that they had any intellectual impact during their brief stays. There was, however, another Byzantine émigré who did settle in France and who did have an impact on the development of Greek studies there: George Hermonymos (d. c. 1508). Hermonymos was probably not from Constantinople itself but from Mistra in the southern Peloponnese, but the town was an important intellectual centre in the late 15th century thanks to the presence there of the celebrated Byzantine intellectual George Gemistos Plethon (d. 1452). Many of the Byzantine intellectual elite traveled to Mistra to study with him, including Bessarion. Hermonymos may well also have been Plethon's pupil. Mistra fell to the Ottomans in 1460, seven years after Constantinople and at some point after that Hermonymos moved to Rome, where he was attached to the household of Cardinal Bessarion. In 1473, he was sent by the pope on a diplomatic mission to England, which ended up with his being thrown into prison. On his release, Hermonymos traveled to France and settled in Paris, remaining there for the rest of his life.

When he settled in Paris, Hermonymos earned his living in a number of ways. He became a teacher of ancient Greek and he attracted some pupils who were later to become extremely prominent scholars. One was Guillaume Budé (1467-1540), another was the celebrated Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), one of the greatest humanists of the 16th century. However, it should be noted that Hermonymos was not, by all accounts, a very good teacher. Those who studied with Chrysoloras and Argyropoulos were full of praise from them. Many of Hermonymos's former pupils, on the other hand, sharply criticised his abilities. Erasmus, rather cuttingly, said: 'He used to stammer in Greek … he could neither have taught if he had wanted to, nor wanted to if he could'. But teaching was not Hermonymos's only activity. He was also a copyist of manuscripts, supplying handwritten copies of Greek texts to wealthy patrons. It was in this activity that he had far more impact than he did as a teacher. Over one hundred manuscripts in his hand have been identified and they are now scattered around libraries all over Europe. Many of these manuscripts contained fairly basic texts,

such as the four Gospels in Greek or Grammar books for learners, like Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Gr. 2628, a Greek-Latin lexicon copied for Cardinal Charles de Bourbon (1434-88). Some of Hermonymos's manuscripts contained classical Greek texts, such as Bibliothèque Nationale, Suppl. Gr. 542, which contains the minor works of Galen. Manuscripts like this must have been the earliest copies of these classical works to reach France. His manuscripts were, moreover, owned by some of the most prominent figures of the French renaissance: Bibliothèque de la Bourgeoisie, Berne 629, which contains a *Life of Aesop* by the 14th century Byzantine scholar, Maximos Planoudes, belonged to Guillaume Budé. In his way, Hermonymos had as much impact on France, as Bessarion had on Italy, even if posterity has not judged him as kindly (Kalatzi, 2009).

To conclude, while the old idea that the Byzantine émigrés somehow ignited Greek studies in the Renaissance has now long since been discredited, they did play a very significant role. They provided the tools, i.e., the language, texts and interpretations, that western scholars then used to form their own approach to the ancient Greek inheritance.

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