

# A Byzantine Looks at The Renaissance

The Attitude of Michael Apostolis  
Toward the Rise of Italy  
To Cultural Eminence

DENO J. GEANAKOPLOS

*University of Illinois*

THAT WESTERN THOUGHT OF THE RENAISSANCE was molded to a considerable degree by Greek learning is well known. The efforts of Italian statesmen such as Lorenzo de' Medici and Popes Nicholas V and Leo X to amass libraries of Greek manuscripts, the warm reception accorded to many Greek refugee-teachers, and the establishment of numerous professorial chairs of Greek in leading universities — all attest to a vital interest in the assimilation of Greek culture on the part of Western Europe during the Quattrocento and Cinquecento.

A number of contemporary Western humanists have left us indications of their high esteem for Greek letters,<sup>1</sup> and some of these views have been woven into modern studies on

<sup>1</sup>To cite only one example, a typical statement of the great Erasmus, who, in a letter to one of his patrons, Anthony of Bergen, Abbot of St. Bertin, says: "We have in Latin at best some small brooks and turbid pools, while the Greeks have the purest fountains and rivers flowing with gold." Latin original in P. S. Allen, *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterdami*, 1 (Oxford, 1906), epistle 149; and for translation see P. Smith, *Erasmus* (New York-London, 1923), 46, and especially note 6 for similar expressions of Erasmus.

the development of Renaissance learning. Almost no effort, on the other hand, has been made by scholars to ascertain the attitude toward the rise of Italian culture of Byzantine intellectuals, either of those who migrated to the West or those who remained in the East. True, the sentiments of certain individual Greeks regarding the conditions of life they experienced in the West (for instance, of Marcus Musurus in Carpi, near Venice)<sup>2</sup> have been made known. And, conversely, we have a fairly adequate idea of the attitude of Western humanists and patrons toward the various emigré Greek scholars in their employ. We know, for example, that in the early stages the Westerners, mindful of their need for adequate instruction, showed great respect for Greeks teaching among them. But, as increasing numbers of near-destitute refugees streamed westward after Constantinople's fall in 1453, the Westerners began to look more critically upon these men and even to formulate an opinion of many as parasites.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately some Italians, with no little satisfaction, came to believe that their mastery of Greek even surpassed that of their Byzantine teachers.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the progressive decline in Western regard for individual Byzantines, the culture of ancient Greece continued to hold its exalted position in Western eyes. But what was the attitude, meantime, of the Byzantines themselves toward the developing talents of the West and especially of Italy, which was displacing Byzantium in the cultural leadership of Europe?

<sup>2</sup> See A. Firmin-Didot, *Alde Manuce et l'Hellénisme à Venise* (Paris, 1875), 501-507 for Greek text of a letter of Musurus and 30-36 for French translation. Also on another famous Greek, Janus Lascaris, see B. Knös, *Un ambassadeur de l'Hellénisme: Janus Lascaris et la tradition greco-byzantine dans l'humanisme français* (Paris-Upsala, 1945), *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> See in A. Tilley, *The Dawn of the French Renaissance* (Cambridge, 1918), Guillaume Budé's impressions of the Greek George Hermonymus, then teaching in Paris.

<sup>4</sup> To cite one example, note the remarks of the Florentine Angelo Poliziano on the Italian mastery of Greek, as quoted in G. Cammelli, *I dotti bizantini e le origini dell'umanesimo: Manuele Crisolora* (Florence, 1941), esp. 6. Poliziano says that "Athens . . . has migrated with all its culture and wisdom to the banks of the Arno."

It is in the hope of casting some light on this question and, at the same time, of making a small contribution to the historiography of the Renaissance that we adduce here a neglected discourse of Michael Apostolis of Crete. Born c. 1422 in Constantinople and, after its fall (with the exception of several trips to Italy) living his remaining years in the Venetian-held island of Crete, Michael is one of numerous learned Byzantines who had dreams of establishing themselves in Italy in lucrative professorships of Greek.<sup>5</sup> Apostolis' ambition, however, was never realized and this fact must be borne in mind when one analyzes his assessment of Western cultural accomplishments.

The speech under consideration was probably composed in Crete, sometime after 1453, in response to an assertion (made presumably by an ecclesiastic, possibly a Greek Uniate) of the superiority of the Western view over the Greek regarding the first birth of Christ (i.e., the eternal generation of the Son in the Trinity).

The title of the discourse, "Michael Apostolis to those who claim that the Westerners are superior to the Easterners with respect to the whole of philosophy and that they [the Westerners] explain perfectly the first birth of Christ and the procession of the Holy Spirit,"<sup>6</sup> is somewhat misleading. Virtually nothing is said about the procession of the Holy Spirit, the emphasis being placed on the problem of the first birth of Christ. Apostolis' discussion of this question leads to his conclusion, in agreement with the Greek church fathers, that the problem cannot be satisfactorily understood by the human

<sup>5</sup> On the life of Apostolis (or Apostolios) see E. Legrand, *Bibliographie Hellénique ou description raisonnée des ouvrages publiés en grec par des Grecs au XV<sup>e</sup> et XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 1 (1885), LVIII-LXX and 2 (1885), 233-259. Also S. Salaville's brief section in *Dict. hist. geog. eccl.*, 3 (Paris, 1924), cols. 1030-1035. For Apostolis' correspondence and additional comments on his life see H. Noiret, *Lettres inédites de Michel Apostolis* (Paris, 1889); G. Hyperides, *Μιχαήλου Ἀποστόλη πονήματα τρία* (Smyrna, 1876); and A. Demetracopoulos, *Ἐθνικὸν Ἡμερολόγιον Βρεττοῦ* (1870), 359-367. My forthcoming book on Greco-Byzantine learning and its transmission to Western Europe during the later Middle Ages and Renaissance will include a discussion of Apostolis' significance.

<sup>6</sup> The entire discourse is published in the original Greek by B. Laourdas, under the title "Μιχαήλ Ἀποστόλη Λόγος περὶ Ἑλλάδος καὶ Εὐρώπης," *Ἐπετηρὶς Ἐταιρείας Βυζαντινῶν Σπουδῶν*, 19 (Athens, 1949), 235-244.

mind. With this as a point of departure he then proceeds, in the second part of his discourse,<sup>7</sup> to compare the relative merits of Greek and Western [i.e., Italian] cultural attainments. It is this latter section which is pertinent for us here and which we now quote in its entirety:

“. . . Did you understand therefore [on the basis of the first section] how great a difference there is between the Greek and the European [Western] fathers in theology and in the other branches of philosophy?<sup>8</sup> Would you not make obeisance before the Easterners who have discovered the beauty of letters and of philosophy itself? Who among the Europeans is wiser than Socrates, Timaeus, and Pythagoras? Who among the Westerners is equal to Plato and Aristotle and Zeno; who equal to Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon? Who can rival Antiphon, Hyperides, and Demosthenes? Who can be compared with Orpheus, Homer, and Stesichorus in poetry; who with Plotinus, Proclus, and Porphyry; with Arius, Origen, and Eusebius, men [i.e., heretics] who have split the seam of Christ's garment? Who can be compared with Cyril, Gregory, and Basil; who, in the field of grammar, can equal or approach Herodian, Apollonius, and Trypho?

I think you might say Cicero, the savant, and the poet Vergil. But as the saying goes, 'Not even Hercules can vanquish two men!' Much less two [Westerners] in comparison with two thousand men [of the East]. 'But we [Westerners],' you may say, 'have more than two thousand.' I agree completely and I have even anticipated such an answer. But do you not understand that Athens alone of all Greece was able to give birth to more philosophers than all Italy had or has? Now, however, I admit, we are the remnants of the Greeks, a view with which you of course agree willingly.

You Italians of the present age are the foremost (*τὰ πρῶτα*) of the Italians. I say that you are the foremost and that we are the remnants (*τὰ λείψανα*) because, in the cycle of civilization, which has a beginning, a middle, and an end, we are in the closing

<sup>7</sup>The first section of the discourse, though irrelevant for the purpose of this article, is very interesting because of Michael's mention of, and comments on, the philosophy of a certain Scotus (evidently he refers here to the work *De divisione naturae* of the Ninth Century Western theologian, John Scotus Erigena, rather than to the late Thirteenth Century, Duns Scotus). On the basis of the Greek church fathers and also of Aristotle, Apostolis, though a Uniate, condemns Scotus' theological position on the question of Christ's first birth. For text see Laourdas, *op. cit.*, 239-243.

<sup>8</sup>The translation printed here is my own. It is, to my knowledge, the first rendering into English.

stage of our culture, while you are in the first phase. And we are enslaved whereas you are free. Yet though we are in such a condition, one can observe, now as well as in the past, that throughout all Italy many Greeks are teaching Latin to Westerners. No one, however, has ever seen or heard a Westerner teaching Greek in Greece. And even if anyone can or should desire to do so it would be impossible, as the ruler of the Turks [text = Huns] has devoured all Greece and is now already seeking to enslave Europe.

May he be destroyed by God who has permitted him to become so strong and sated with our blood. O Christ-Emperor, stop him, stay his violence and deflect his knife and spear. Have pity on us, be merciful, reconcile yourself with us and watch over us who are again like the lost drachma (τὴν ἀπολλυμένην πάλιν δραχμὴν).<sup>9</sup> Recall our scattered race so downtrodden and humble. Grant to your servants of the West concord, strength, and force of will, zeal and mercy. Remove from us the bitter executioner and enemy; grant harmony to all who bear the name of Christ even if this hitherto has been impossible. But now let them [the Christians] enjoy concord because of the Turks who commit evil acts without ceasing and tread upon your holy vessels, insulting the pure faith and the church itself, to which you have promised, 'Nor can the gates of Hell prevail over the Church.'<sup>10</sup> Yours is the will when you will, yours the strength when the time is worthy, yours the honor, glory, and strength throughout the centuries."<sup>11</sup>

It is evident from the foregoing that though Apostolis never relinquished his belief in the cultural superiority of the Greeks, he is, at the same time, conscious of living at an important turning point in history. He admits, however reluctantly (and of course 1453 is persistent in his thoughts), that the Byzantines are now only "the remnants of the Greeks" (τὰ λείψανα τῶν Ἑλλήνων)<sup>12</sup> and that the Italians, though yet inferior to the ancients, herald the dawn of a new age. Note his reference to the beginning, middle, and end of the historical cycle and the relative positions of the Greeks and Italians in this process. For Apostolis there is evidently nothing intrinsically deficient in the Greek culture which Byzantium had sought to preserve intact for over a millenium.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 15. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 16. 18-19.

<sup>11</sup> Doubtless, phrases taken from the Greek ecclesiastical tradition.

<sup>12</sup> See text in Laourdas edition, *op. cit.*, 243, line 25.

Indeed, in keeping with the traditional Byzantine belief in the inability of subsequent generations to improve upon the civilization of ancient Greece (for which view Byzantine culture has been accused, by those who fail adequately to understand it, of lacking an "idea of progress")<sup>13</sup> Apostolis, in this treatise, seems to ascribe the collapse of the Byzantine state and culture not to any internal lack of viability but rather to the Turkish domination.

Thus in a final section he invokes the aid of God to deliver the Greek East from the bondage of the barbarian Turk. This concluding, moving part of the speech, so different in tone from the more pedestrian opening sentences and the redundancies characteristic of most of his other writings, may be looked upon as an addition to the Fifteenth Century literature on *concordia mundi*,<sup>14</sup> an appeal to a higher unity of all Christendom, Western as well as Eastern, without regard to political or religious differences.

The views expressed in the speech are, to be sure, those of a single individual—and one embittered over his failure to win scholarly recognition from the Italians.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, because some of the ideas incorporated are not uncommon to other Byzantines of the period, the discourse can probably be considered as a typical expression of the attitude of at least one important group of late Fifteenth Century Greek intellectuals toward the rising cultural eminence of Italy *vis-à-vis* the perishing but still proud civilization of the Byzantine world.

<sup>13</sup> On this see the recent, enlightening remarks of G. Downey, "The Byzantine Church and the Presentness of the Past," *Theology Today*, 15 (1958), esp. 93–98: "The view of the custodial function [of Byzantine culture] has not always been understood. This was no static situation, in which something created in the past was kept alive artificially . . . [Preserving the classics] was not a deadening process, but the practice of a technique of education which had been tried for a long time and was generally acknowledged to be what was needed . . ." Cf. also R. Tsanoff, "Ancient Classical Alternatives and Approaches to the Idea of Progress," *Greek and Byzantine Studies*, 1 (San Antonio, 1958), 81ff.

<sup>14</sup> For a recent work discussing various aspects of this theme see W. J. Bouwsma, *Concordia Mundi: The Career and Thought of Guillaume Postel* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1957), esp. 64ff.

<sup>15</sup> See Noiret, *Lettres de Michel Apostolis*, epistles 27 and 92 (bis); and Legrand, *Bibl. Hell.*, 2, epistle 5, all of which emphasize Apostolis' desire to emigrate to the West and find a teaching position there.