

**Europa e Italia.  
Studi in onore di Giorgio Chittolini**

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## ***What did Greeks see of Italy? Thoughts on Byzantine and Tuscan travel accounts\****

by Anthony Molho

What did the Greeks see of Florence? I do not refer to Greeks, in general. Rather, I have in mind that small army of Greek priests, theologians, court officials, and other hangers-on, who, in the early months of 1439, gathered in Florence to muster the Latins' help in the defence of Constantinople, while also hoping, parenthetically, to bring an end to the Schism<sup>1</sup>. More than 700 men, a fair sample of the Byzantine Empire's *crème de la crème*, made their way to Florence. First, they arrived in Venice, spent several weeks in Ferrara, and then, from February to May 1439, they camped in Florence, guests of the Papacy and of the city's government. The subtleties of the theological exchanges and dogmatic controversies of these encounters will not be of concern here. Much of the extant documentation has been published in excellent editions, and many of the controversies have attracted the attention of distinguished historians; so have the circumstances that led to the signing of the Union between the Greek and Latin Churches and to the Union's eventual failure. This remarkable event – the last sustained effort until our own days to forge some sort of European unity – could offer an occasion to rethink the relations between Byzantium and what we have come to refer to as Renaissance Italy. Much ink has been spilled on the impact of a few dozen Byzantine men of letters on the course of Italian (eventually, European) humanism. But what did the Byzantine notables who dwelled in Venice, Ferrara, and Florence for a reasonably prolonged period

<sup>\*</sup> I wish to thank Dimitris Gondikas and his colleagues at Princeton University for the invitation to present, before a distinguished audience, the first draft of this essay. References, below, are kept to a minimum, as I anticipate developing the themes of this presentation in a project devoted to Italian and Byzantine travel literature in the late Middle Ages.

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this essay, the relatively recent *Firenze e il concilio del 1439. Convegno di studi. Firenze, 29 novembre - 2 dicembre 1989*, 2 voll., ed. P. Viti, Firenze 1994 contains a series of excellent studies with up to date bibliographic references to the Council of Florence. Of these, Anna Pontani's article, *Firenze nelle fonti greche del Concilio*, vol. 2, p. 753-811 addresses, albeit often from a different perspective, themes in this essay. The best overall treatment of the Council remains J. Gill, *The Council of Florence*, Cambridge 1959 (Firenze 1967). Much useful information is also contained in J. Gill, *Personalities of the Council of Florence*, Oxford 1964.

note about their experiences there? What is it that sufficiently teased their imagination as to have left a trace in their writings?

The question comes to mind almost spontaneously, as does a sense of puzzlement at (what, initially, seemed) the failure of most other historians to ask it. It might be worth asking regardless of what European city these travellers had observed. In the case of a city such as Florence, the question has more than a passing interest. This is so not only because, from the time of Chrysoloras in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, to Bessarion and a host of other Byzantine scholars, Florence had been the focal point of a remarkable effort to re-introduce the knowledge of Greek letters to western Europe. It is also the case that the second quarter of the fifteenth century was a period of glorious activity in the realm of the arts and letters in Florence, and that Florentines themselves, often succumbing to a spirit of proud self satisfaction, admiringly talked about themselves and their accomplishments.

Initially, it seemed that a good place to begin might have been the nature of the Greeks' curiosity about the cities which hosted them for a few months. Soon, however, this expectation turned to surprise, and only shortly thereafter to frustration. The more one read the available sources – from the great chronicle of Syropoulos to the admittedly few surviving bits of other evidence – the more one became puzzled by the Greeks' reticence on matters that, one would like to think, should have left an impression on them<sup>2</sup>. When they were in Florence, Donatello's David might have left them indifferent. But should the basilica of Santa Maria Novella where a number of them lodged, not elicited a comment or two from them? Or the basilicas of Santa Croce, and San Miniato and its Byzantine mosaics just outside the city? Instead, with the exception of a few details to be examined below, at first sight, the records left by the Greek priests and noblemen about their Florentine sojourn seem puzzling in their paucity. Apparently, the Greeks either were uninterested, or unimpressed.

There are few traces in their writings of the curiosity Italian travellers, time and again throughout the communal period, exhibited for the lands of the Greeks, Arabs, and Ottoman Turks. Cristoforo Buondelmonti and Ciriaco d'Ancona are but two remarkable, but from this perspective not exceptional, Italian travellers to the Aegean Sea in the first half of the fifteenth century<sup>3</sup>. A

<sup>2</sup> The text of Sylvester Syropoulos' *Απομνημονεύματα* is in V. Laurent, *Les "Mémoires" du grand ecclésiarque de l'Église de Constantinople Sylvester Syropoulos sur le concile de Florence (1438-1439)*, Paris 1971, where, in the *Introduction* one finds a summary of Syropoulos' life and career, as well as a history of his *Mémoires*. Useful also for a discussion of Syropoulos' position during the Council and his change of heart following his return to Constantinople is Gill, *Personalities*, ch. 12: *The 'Acta' and the Memoirs of Syropoulos as History*. For the *ekphrasis* of the *festi di San Giovanni* in 1439 written by a Greek member of the Greek delegation, *Quae supersunt actorum graecorum Concilii Florentini*, ed. J. Gill, Roma 1953.

<sup>3</sup> For general back ground see two relatively recent books, which contain ample bibliography: F. Cardini, *In Terrasanta. Pellegrini italiani tra Medioevo e prima età moderna*, Bologna 2002; N. Bisaha, *Creating East and West. Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks*, Philadelphia 2004. Much useful information accompanied by interesting insights in J. Hankins, *Renaissance Crusaders: Humanist Crusade Literature in the Age of Mehmed II*, in «Dumbarton Oaks Papers», 49 (1995), p. 111-207.

similarly acute curiosity about the world found magnificent expression in Fra Mauro's *Mappamondo*, completed only shortly following the Greek delegation's stop over in Venice<sup>4</sup>. Along side these, literally dozens of other travellers left intensely interesting accounts of their pilgrimages, diplomatic missions, or commercial ventures. Why were the Italians so loquacious, and the Greeks, seemingly, not? More precisely, what words or expressions might seem more appropriate for us to use when referring to the failure of the Greeks to leave a substantial record (except of course for what refers to theological and ritual matters) of their Italian journey? How to account for the choice of events, sites, monuments, or objects they described, while they overlooked so much more? Was it a failure of imagination? Lack of curiosity, or disinterest in mundane matters? A particular Greek or Byzantine perspective?

Whatever the case, the fact is that a student of the subject is confronted by records that either included relatively few bits of evidence, or that, often, range from the reticent to the silent. To be sure, this silence has not gone unnoticed. More than thirty years ago, Cyril Mango, reflecting on what he defined as the distorting image of Byzantine literature, rather despondently concluded that: «Many Byzantines travelled to strange lands, went on missions to Baghdad and Kiev, performed pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem, spent years in captivity among the Arabs, yet not one of them has recorded his experience and observations»<sup>5</sup>. For all the hyperbole contained in this judgement, one can't help but note that others scholars, such as George Dennis, editor of an excellent edition of Manuel Paleologos's letters, Edmund Fryde even, most recently, Guglielmo Cavallo would in all likelihood have agreed with Mango<sup>6</sup>. Implicit in these judgments is a juxtaposition between Byzantine travel accounts and comparable narratives of the same period written by west European travellers. If, according to Mango, not one Byzantine writer recorded his travel experiences and observations, the fact is that one need go no further than to mention Marco Polo to set the contrast between Byzantium and the West, at least in this realm of endeavour. For many of these scholars, the comparison did not result in Byzantium's favour.

There is even a tradition in Byzantine historiography that imputes to intellectuals of the Paleologan period an inability to come to terms with real-

<sup>4</sup> A. Cattaneo, *La Mappamundi di fra Mauro Camaldolese. Venezia, 1450*. Doctoral Thesis at the European University Institute, Firenze 2005; and A. Cattaneo, *Fra Mauro "Cosmographus Incomparabilis" and his "Mappamundi": Documents, Sources, and Protocols*, in D. Ramada Curto, A. Cattaneo, A. Ferrand Almeida, eds., *La cartografia europea tra primo rinascimento e fine dell'illuminismo*. Atti del convegno internazionale "The Making of European Cartography", Firenze 2003, p. 19-48.

<sup>5</sup> C. Mango, *Byzantine Literature as a Distorting Mirror*, in C. Mango, *Byzantium and its Image. History and Culture of the Byzantine Empire and its Heritage*, London 1984 (first published 1975), ch. 2, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> *The Letters of Manuel Paleologus II. Texts, Translation and Notes*, by G.T. Dennis, Washington D.C. 1977; E. Fryde, *A comparison between the Byzantine and Italian Renaissances*, in *The Early Paleologan Renaissance (1261-ca. 1369)*, Leiden 2000, p. 387-398; G. Cavallo, *Alfabetismi e letture a Bisanzio*, in *Lire et écrire à Byzance*, ed. B. Mondrain, Paris 2006, p. 97-109.

ity, to transcend the rhetorical schemes and ekphrastic traditions which, some scholars thought, led Byzantine writers to repeat increasingly refined expressions which were unrelated with objects they observed and situations they faced. Mango himself had ventured the thought that «the dichotomy between literature and a changing reality is...one of the salient features of Byzantine culture»<sup>7</sup>. Commenting on difficulties of understanding meaning and placing in proper contexts Byzantine letters, Georges Denis expressed his frustration by commenting that «even the best letters were written according to rules which abhorred proper names, precise dates, and concrete details. The criterion of a good letter was the “purity” of its Attic Greek...»<sup>8</sup> In her very interesting dissertation of a few years ago, Corinne Jouanno summarized this general point. The view of reality depicted by Byzantine authors of romances amounted to an «univers imbelli, magnifié, comme l’indiquent l’usage constant que nos auteurs font de l’hyperbole, et leur gout marqué pour l’expressivité». And she added that in the texts she studied, «un monde se met en place où les règles sont autres»<sup>9</sup>. In her own study of Byzantine travel books, admittedly from an earlier period of time, Catia Galatariotou arrived at a conclusion that was not far removed from that of these other scholars: «The researcher who reads Byzantine travellers’ accounts hoping for very substantial amounts of factual information is likely to be disappointed»<sup>10</sup>. In recent years, some mild objections have been voiced against this widely held consensus. For all their caution in accepting this view, Liz James and Henry Maguire have not been able – or so it seems to this writer – to provide an alternative explanation, that would account for the minuscule number of Byzantine travel accounts, or for their authors’ failure to pay attention to the places they visited in their travels<sup>11</sup>.

This essay will concentrate on the evidence contained in one late Byzantine text, Sylvester Syropoulos’ great Chronicle of the Councils of Ferrara and Florence in the first months of 1439. Anna Pontani, in the most recent, and arguably most acute examination of the issues raised in this essay, has herself noted the paucity of evidence left by the Greek visitors to Italy in 1438-1439, and the lack of a Byzantine tradition of travel writing. Repeatedly, in an essay devoted to the subject, she notes the «grande iato» between the Greek and Italian cultures, and the existence of an «incolmabile differenza di mentalità» between them, the «incomunicabilità reciproca»<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Mango, *Byzantine Literature*, ch. 2, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Dennis in *The Letters of Manuel Paleologus II*, p. XIX.

<sup>9</sup> C. Jouanno, *L’ekphrasis dans la littérature byzantine d’imagination*, Doctorat de troisième cycle, Université de Paris IV - Sorbonne, Octobre 1987, p. 324.

<sup>10</sup> C. Galatariotou, *Travel and Perception in Byzantium*, in «Dumbarton Oaks Papers», 47 (1993), p. 221-241.

<sup>11</sup> L. James, ed., *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture, Introduction*, Cambridge 2007; H. Maguire, *Truth and Convention in Byzantine Descriptions of Works of Art*, in «Dumbarton Oaks Papers», 28 (1974), p. 111-140.

<sup>12</sup> Pontani, *Firenze*, p. 761. See also her statement, on p. 760, regarding the «bizantini persuasi



She adds that the evidence left by the Greeks is even more scarce than that of the Russian visitors to Florence, on the occasion of the Council.

The question of what can properly be considered a travel account has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years, without a clear consensus having been formed on this issue<sup>13</sup>. Here, I adopt a capacious definition of the term, and consider that Syropoulos's Chronicle is no less a travel account than, at one chronological end, was Benjamin of Tudela's record of his visitations of Jewish communities across the Mediterranean, and at the other end, Cristoforo Colombo's letters from the New World. All these, and dozens of other such narratives, were meant to convey their authors' impressions and reflections during their peregrinations, undertaken for one or another reason. Differences of natural environment, language, customs, very often also of religion impressed these writers with the notion that a distance – more often than not physical, but, also, cultural and political – separated them from their homes and their familiar surroundings. This notion of distance justifies the inclusion of Syropoulos' account in the category of travel literature, even though he wrote it following his return to Constantinople. Despite his account's ideological colouration, and his explicit aim to justify, before his opponents in Constantinople, his own comportment during and immediately following the Councils of Ferrara-Florence, his Chronicle, organized as it is chronologically, conveys a sense of the differences in place, and occasionally in customs, that he observed in the course of the Council's proceedings.

Following a long and not easy crossing from Constantinople, Syropoulos and the Patriarch's retinue arrived in Venice. Here, then, is the record of his arrival, the first impact, as it were, the city made on him:

We, for our part, tied up our boat at the dock of Saint Mark, and having left it we made our way to the ducal palace; and the duke, having known about it, ordered immediately that we be introduced to him, and upon seeing us at the hall's entrance he immediately rose and, as we were walking toward him, in like manner he came toward us<sup>14</sup>.

The parsimoniousness of Syropoulos' account is striking, to say the least. Nothing of what he saw, even in his brief stroll from the dock to the Ducal

della loro diversità», and on p. 770 her reference to the «silenzio su Firenze delle fonti greche del Concilio».

<sup>13</sup> Recent discussions on travel literature have been numerous. I have found especially useful Cardini, *In Terrasanta*; M.B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World. Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600*, Ithaca 1988; K. Parker, ed., *Early Modern Tales of Orient*, London 1999; J.-P. Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance. South India through European Eyes, 1250-1625*, Cambridge 2000; Ρίκα Μπενβενίστε, *Εβραίοι Ταξιδιώτες τον Μεσαίωνα*, Αθήνα 2000; A. Garcia Espada, *Marco Polo y la Cruzada. Historia de la literatura de viajes a las Indias en el siglo XIV*, Madrid 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Syropoulos in Laurent, *Les "Mémoires"*, IV, p. 16: *ἡμεῖς δε την ημετέραν περι δεύτεραν ὥραν της ημέρας εις τον του αγίου Μάρκου ὠρμίσαμεν ναύσταθμον, και εξελθόντες εις το του δουκός παρεγενόμεθα παλάτιον. ο και μαθών ο δουξ επέταξεν ευθύς και ήλθομεν προς αυτόν, και άμα τω οφθίῃνα ημάς αυτό από της πύλης τού τρικλίνου, ευθής ανέστη, και ως ημεῖς προς αυτόν εβαδίζομεν, ούτω και αυτός προς ημάς ήρχετο...*

palace, seems to have sufficiently struck him as noteworthy. Not the canals, not the play of light and water, not the imposing architectural complex of the Ducal Palace and the adjacent cathedral of San Marco, not even the four magnificent bronze horses on top of Saint Mark's façade, pilfered from Constantinople more than two centuries before. All that, he obviously saw. But none merited inclusion in his Chronicle. Instead, he thought it important to describe, in an equally Spartan manner, the ritual geometries of the Patriarch's meeting with the Doge, as each coreographically crossed the Palace's Great Hall approaching the other.

Monuments and local customs were not exactly what Syropoulos was after. His concern was to report on the long exchanges on issues of dogma and theology. As he, himself, alerted his readers, his aim was to provide an exact record of what was said and done in the course of the negotiations and exchanges about the Council (*ακριβώς... υφηγούμαι τα τότε λεγθέντα και πραχθέντα*)<sup>15</sup>. He was also intensely concerned with the internecine fights, even on non theological issues, between members of the Roman and Greek delegations, and he certainly did not overlook the often acute disagreements among the pro- and anti-Unionist Greeks. Naturally, he was extremely sensitive about issues of protocol and ritual, and devoted long passages to conveying a sense of the magnificent hospitality extended to the two leaders of the Greek delegation, describing the opulence of the gifts made to them, and insisting on the solemnity of the rituals mounted by various local government or ecclesiastical officials in the Greeks' honour. His references to palaces, churches, means of transportation, people's dress, and local customs were incidentally woven in the passages intended to celebrate the Emperor's and Patriarch's interchanges with local officials.

For example, he referred admiringly to the lodgings ceded by the Venetian government to the Emperor (*έδειξαν ημίν οικίαν λαμπράν και περιφανή...έχουσαν κλινας τριάντα εξ*) as well as the Patriarch's lodgings in the monastery of San Giorgio, which, Syropoulos was careful to point out, were stocked with all sorts of food stuff, listed here in an obvious effort to convey a sense of abundance and of the honour bestowed by his hosts to the Patriarch<sup>16</sup>. Just a little later, he offered a detailed description of the *Bucentauro*, the Doge's ship, sent to fetch the Emperor from his residence to the Ducal Palace. In addition to the ship's lay out, which Syropoulos describes briskly, he spent some time dwelling on the coloured fabrics that covered the seats and the walls of this imposing vessel. Following his admiration of the tissues' pleasant colours (*ουκ άνευ τέρψεως εκπληρούν*), he closed his description by referring to the five gold covered, sculpted lions of Saint Mark, that decorated the ship's bow and stern<sup>17</sup>. It was in this boat that the Doge and his retinue arrived to accompany the Emperor's own ship to the center of

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, V, paragraph 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, IV, paragraph 18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, IV, paragraph 20.

Venice. Escorted by a large number of other embarkations (*πλήθος πλοιαρίων*), this crowded and imposing cortège gave the impression of being another, mobile Venice (*άλλην κινητήν Βενετίαν*)<sup>18</sup>. The crowd's acclamation, the trumpets' blaring, the bells' persistent and loud ringing accompanied the cortège as the Emperor was led to his quarters, the only blemish in this magnificent occasion offered by the day's rainy weather.

Only once in his description of the delegation's Venetian sojourn did Syropoulos' attention escape from the magnificence of the Emperor's and the Patriarch's reception in Venice. When, together with the Patriarch's following, he was led to the Treasure of San Marco to view the Pala d'Oro, he could hardly contain his enthusiasm<sup>19</sup>. Historians of the Council could hardly have missed Syropoulos' excited description. The sight of those holy relics (*ιερά κειμήλια*) which, because of the law of booty (*νόμω της λείας*) had been taken from Constantinople to Venice at the time of the sacking (*αλώσεως*) by the Latins triggered his enthusiasm, expressed in a string of adjectives and adverbs which conveyed his admiration for the gems and gold, the craftsmanship of the sacred object, and its obvious material value. The nostalgic note on which he closed his long description of the Pala d'Oro suggests the Chronicle's underlying tone, perhaps even Syropoulos' psychological predisposition toward everything he saw in his Italian journey:

We heard that these icons come from the Great Holy Church [*Aghia Sophia*], but from the inscriptions and the images of the Comninoi we recognized with certainty that they were from the monastery of the Pantocrator. Thus, if these were of the monastery, one must consider how much they were surpassed by those of the Great Church, by the brilliance and splendour of the materials, the pleasantness and variety of the art, and the extraordinary value of the objects [*τη διαυγεία και λαμπρότητι της ύλης και τη φαιδρότητι και ποικιλία της τέχνης και τη του τιμήματος υπερβολή*].

Up to this point, for most of his narrative, Syropoulos carefully and somewhat diffidently observed the hierarchic and ritual order of things, intent on assuring his readers that the Venetians had granted their due of honour and respect to the distinguished visitors. Now, thanks to the sight of the Pala d'Oro he stepped back from his habitual angle of vision. Faced with this exquisitely beautiful object, he remembered a past whose unambiguous greatness exceeded any thing that he observed in Venice. To reinforce this impression was the knowledge that the Pala d'Oro's new owners could not even figure out the beautiful object's provenance, unable as they were to decipher the inscriptions and other markings on the Byzantine icons and relics they had removed from Constantinople and assembled in Venice. Arguably, the memory of a glorious but faded past was deeply engraved in his consciousness, and it helps us to understand the self referential quality of Syropoulos' recounting of his Venetian sojourn. He seemed detached, unable

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, IV, paragraph 21.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, IV, paragraph 25.

to see anything that could not be accommodated within the boundaries of his Byzantine culture, its history and its traditions. The strangeness and differentness of his temporary surroundings remained beyond his intellectual grasp. They were, as we might say today, outside his mental screen.

The pattern of Syropoulos' recounting of the Ferrarese and Florentine legs of his journey remained largely unchanged. He devoted long pages to the theological discussions and other sorts of squabbles that punctuated the presence of the Greeks, and only occasionally, when he ventured into a description of a particularly important ritual, or encounter (say between the Pope and the Patriarch) was his attention drawn to some of the surroundings. There are graphic descriptions of the Marques' sumptuous boat sent to meet the delegates as they travelled down the Po, on their way from Venice to Ferrara, and of the Papal palace in Ferrara where the Greeks were led to meet Eugenius IV<sup>20</sup>. Syropoulos reports on the laborious negotiations that preceded the first meeting of the Patriarch and the Pope. Should the two embrace, as the Patriarch insisted, or should the Patriarch kiss the Pope's foot, as was the Roman custom? And what about the sitting arrangement in the cathedral? Should the Pope be seated between the Greeks and the Latins, a visible link between the two delegations, or should he take his place on one side of the isle together with his bishops and cardinals? Should the Pope's throne be aligned with those of the Patriarch and Emperor, or should the front of the two visitors' thrones come up to (but no further than) the back of the Papal throne?<sup>21</sup> In short, Syropoulos was generous in providing detailed, specific information about the complex rituals bespeaking the ambitions and fears of both delegations.

Just as with his account of Venice, occasionally (perhaps one should say, very occasionally) his attention strayed to a detail of his surroundings. When, for example, the Emperor and Patriarch were first led to meet the Pope, the Chamberlain led the Greeks through the Papal Palace to the hall where Eugenius was waiting for them. But Syropoulos noticed the strange custom of unlocking and then locking each door as the cortège traversed room after room on its way to the Papal Chamber. His curiosity peaked by this strange custom, he explained that «this was their custom» (*οὕτω γὰρ ἐστὶν αὐτοῖς ἔθος*)<sup>22</sup>. It is one of the very rare moments when he noted, with the outside observer's inquisitive eye, the natives' strange customs. Somewhat later, angered by the accusations of heresy levelled at the Greeks by some of the Latins, he reported that these «extremely grave» (*δεινότατον*) charges were written in notebooks that were being sold publicly<sup>23</sup>. A hurried glance onto what he observed in a public space in Ferrara – this is about the limit of

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, IV, paragraph 29 (the Marchese of Ferrara's boat); IV, paragraph 34 (the Palace of the Pope's residence).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, IV, paragraph 40.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, IV, paragraph 34.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, VI, paragraph 8.

Syropoulos' curiosity about his surroundings. Much the same holds for his description of Florence. Syropoulos was obviously impressed by the magnificent reception reserved for the Greek visitors by the city's authorities, although, interestingly, he said nothing about Leonardo Bruni's speech, delivered by the Florentine Chancellor in Greek for the Emperor and the Patriarch's benefit. Some other details did not escape his attention.

Everyone, men and women hurried to his encounter, so that they could see and enjoy. And one could observe groups of noble ladies, some sitting in the balconies and even the buildings' tiled roofs – for in Florence, they walk and sit on roof tiles without any fear – while others, in magnificent dress, occupied the best places in street corners, from where they could admire the royal procession. Everywhere a joyous feast had been organized for the king's entrance<sup>24</sup>.

It is not the purpose of this short essay to provide a summary of Syropoulos' very lengthy chronicle. So far, the object of this presentation has been to offer sense of the narrative context in which this traveller wove his descriptions of what Joseph Gill referred to as «other matters», that is matters not related to the Council's theological discussions. On the basis of the few, preceding examples, one could venture the thought that the emphasis of some historians on the «dichotomy between [Byzantine] travel literature and reality» may be slightly more pessimistic than is warranted by the evidence<sup>25</sup>. A reading of the Chronicle does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that rhetorical conventions or antiquisant ekphraseis stood on the way of the author's ability to describe situations or objects he observed. His descriptions of the *Bucentauro* and of the Marques of Ferrara's boats are concrete, precise, written in a clear Greek that enables the reader to have a pretty good idea of the ships' appearance and lay out<sup>26</sup>. The same could be said about the small number of other descriptions in the text. Anna Pontani singled out the few instances where Syropoulos transcribed in Greek letters Italian words he heard in exchanges with Italian participants in the discussions. *Ἀμπεας πατιέντσιαν*, urged the Italians on the Greeks who were unhappy with their accommodations in Ferrara. And Giuliano Cesarini, peremptorily ordered: *Πρωτονοτάριε σκριβα*<sup>27</sup>. It is a modest, if tangible collection of observations the Greeks saw and heard during their months-long Italian sojourn. The problem that requires an explanation is not so much the opaqueness (or, if one will, the complex rhetorical construction) of the descriptions, as is Syropoulos' neglect of, or seeming lack of interest in his surroundings. To put it another way, the issue at hand seems to be the author's self centeredness, even his lack of curiosity, not necessarily the lite-rary, or rhetorical expression of his observations. Michel de Certeau argued that what he defined as

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, VII, paragraph 36.

<sup>25</sup> Mango, *Byzantine Literature*, p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> On Syropoulos' language, Laurent, *Les "Mémoires", Introduction*.

<sup>27</sup> Pontani, *Firenze*, p. 767.

“Heterology” enables a traveller to come to terms with others in different societies, and that a travel narrative offers an imprint of this experience<sup>28</sup>. Travel, and the narrative that it expresses, makes it possible for the writer to better define the bounds of his own society and of his own cultural self. One is struck by the degree to which it is difficult to apply these insights to Syropoulos’ narrative, in which the narrator’s persona seems to be confined within the limits of his own culture.

The problem with extending this reflection to a larger corpus of works is precisely that such a corpus does not seem to exist. Even if the texts studied by Galatariotou add to the size of this corpus, when all is said and done, one has to admit that the Byzantines left behind them a meagre number of travel accounts, at least when measured against comparable Italian narratives<sup>29</sup>.

In his very useful book on Italian accounts of pilgrimages to Palestine in the Middle Ages, Franco Cardini counted at least 100 such published works<sup>30</sup>. To these one has to add unpublished accounts, as well as those describing travels to regions of northern Europe. Given the striking disparity in numbers, a comparison between Byzantine and Italian travel narratives is very difficult to make. For the purposes of this preliminary exercise, three Tuscan travel accounts to the eastern Mediterranean will be juxtaposed to the preceding hypotheses regarding Syropoulos’ Chronicle. All three accounts are well known to students of late medieval (or renaissance) Tuscany; along side many of the dozens referred to by Cardini, they have been subject of often acute analyses. These three sample accounts span a long period, from the late fourteenth to the late fifteenth centuries, all are written in a fluid Tuscan vernacular, each of them exists in a single manuscript (a fact that suggests that none of them was widely circulated), none of the three authors was particularly prominent, although one, Felice di Michele Brancacci, author of an account of his embassy to Alexandria in the early 1420s, was well connected in Florence, a fact that did not prevent (to the contrary, it contributed to) his banishment from the city in 1434. The other two are Lionardo Frescobaldi, who, along side two companions, travelled to Mount Sinai in 1384, and ser Zanobi di Antonio del Lavacchio, a priest who accompanied a Florentine embassy to Egypt in 1488<sup>31</sup>. Each of these travellers set off on his journey for a specific purpose: Frescobaldi, because he wished to visit the Holy lands, although, also, he seems to have been given the task of reporting on military

<sup>28</sup> M. de Certeau, *Montaigne: ‘Des Cannibales’*, in M. de Certeau, *Le lieu de l’autre. Histoire religieuse et mystique*, Paris 2005 (1981).

<sup>29</sup> Galatariotou, *Travel and Perception*.

<sup>30</sup> Cardini, *In Terrasanta*, p. 473-481.

<sup>31</sup> F. Brancacci, *Diario di Felice Brancacci ambasciatore con Carlo Federighi al Cairo per il comune di Firenze (1422)*, ed. D. Castellacci, in «Archivio storico italiano», 41 (1881), p. 157-188, 326-334; Lionardo di N. Frescobaldi, *Viaggio in Terrasanta*, in *Viaggi in Terrasanta*, ed. C. Angelici, Firenze 1944, p. 39-167; Zanobi di Antonio del Lavacchio, *Santo viaggio*, in *Relazione di un viaggio al Soldato [sic!] d’Egitto e in Terra Santa, 1488-1489*, ed. G. Corti, in «Archivio storico italiano», 116 (1958), p. 247-266.

fortifications he observed in his travels; Brancacci had been sent to negotiate a commercial treaty between the Florentine and Mamelouk governments; Zanobi di Antonio was a priest in the retinue of another ambassador, but he was also clearly driven by a desire to undertake a pilgrimage to Palestine and Mount Sinai. The sights which elicited their comments were incidental to their primary missions. Of course, this, also, was the case with Syropoulos.

What, then, can one say about these three accounts, especially if they are read against the grain of the preceding reflections about Syropoulos' Chronicle? Two observations, preliminarily suggested here, may serve as a basis for further reflection.

First, a reader cannot but be struck by the curiosity shown by the three authors, by their interest in noting, often in graphic detail, their impressions of their travels. All three wrote long commentaries about their sea crossings, they described the cities they visited, the people with whom they came in contact, the animals and vegetation they saw, local habits in eating, dressing, and socializing. It is difficult to single out examples, from the dozens contained in each. They bespeak these three men's curiosity, their penchant to write down their observations, their sense of the differentness, even the exotic quality of what they saw. Frescobaldi's cameo portrait of Arab women wearing their burkas, or his description of the Arabs' eating habits<sup>32</sup>; Brancacci's nearly breathless description of an elephant («il quale animale è tanto mirabile e di strana fazione, che non mi dice il cuore di saperne parlare»)<sup>33</sup>; ser Zanobi's descriptions of Rhodes and of Alexandria (with the adjective *incredibile* punctuating his narrative) are typical examples<sup>34</sup>. One could of course imagine that these descriptions conform to a long medieval tradition of *mirabilia*. One could also suspect that they were filtered through their authors' readings of medieval sources, such as, for example, Mandeville. But the baggage of cultural assumptions they carried with them was most evident when they sought explanations for some of their observations, as for example when Frescobaldi explains, in conformity with a long standing tradition, that the pyramids had been the Pharaohs' granaries<sup>35</sup>. And however much the imagination of these authors was coloured by their readings of vulgarisations of Pliny, which were in wide circulation in Florence, their descriptions of strange animals or unknown plants seem to have been directly informed by their observations<sup>36</sup>.

The previous generalization should no doubt be greatly nuanced when one comes to the very substantial portions of their accounts which refer to biblical stories, to the holy sites and the miraculous relics they sought out

<sup>32</sup> Frescobaldi, *Viaggio*, p. 77, 81-82.

<sup>33</sup> Brancacci, *Diario*, p. 178.

<sup>34</sup> *Relazione di un viaggio*, two examples: «e per la terra non si vede se non palle di bonbarde, e intendemo che fùrano colpi 3700; e védesi in molti lati le palle fratte nelle mura: cose incredibili» (p. 253); «ché non si può andare per le vie per la multitudine della gente, che è chosa incredibile a credere: e questa è la propria verità» (p. 256).

<sup>35</sup> On the pyramids as granaries, Cardini, *In Terrasanta*, p. 422-423.

<sup>36</sup> On the use of Pliny in Florence, *ibidem*, p. 422, 424, 428.

with impressive persistence. It is here where observation was heavily laced with fantasy, where these travellers drew on their easy familiarity with biblical and Christian texts to enhance their narratives' authenticity, and to root (or frame) them in a context that would be familiar to their readers<sup>37</sup>. All three undertook systematic searches for traces of the Christian past and evidence for the survival of genuine devotion. In their search for a Christian topography, they identified sites, and relics, described rituals, referred to miracles they had read about or more rarely witnessed themselves, spared no detail in describing the hardships they endured on the way to their holy destinations. Historians have often wondered what elements of these descriptions were based on observation, what on mere hearing, what, even, on sheer invention or on the vague recollection of accounts written by others. It is of course important to pursue this question, to understand how their syncretic imaginations were fertilized by readings, memories, observations, and, no doubt, desires; or, if one will, how the transformative power of their imaginations led them to express their experiences in discursive registers that could vacillate between the realistic and the fantastical; how, furthermore, the existence of a tradition, rooted, perhaps not only, in the popularity of Marco Polo's *Milione* had slowly created a literary convention that inspired men such as Brancacci, Frescobaldi, Zanobi and, literally, dozens, perhaps hundreds of others to pick up their writing instruments to describe for others their physical and spiritual adventures<sup>38</sup>.

What matters here, however, is another thought, with which to end this brief essay. One could perhaps suggest that a key to these travellers' persistent curiosity, and their constant effort to extend their imagination toward unfamiliar people, places, and situations was the conviction that, in some inchoate form, authenticity and truth were rooted far from their own *patria*. Their yearning to see, and hear, and touch the physical remains of their culture's founding – Christian – moments led them to seek out ways of returning to the Holy Places, to face endless dangers and adventures, to expose themselves to the whims of fortune and the unpredictable behaviour of peoples they met on their way. Their *nostos* for a spiritual home led to the discovery of people and places – real people and places – that were not only far from their own comfortable homes in central Italy, but, on occasion, also inspired some of them, however tentatively and cautiously, to compare their own familiar environment to the unfamiliar sites and sounds they encountered on the way to their destinations – which were at once spiritual and physical. In short, these men (and the thousands of others who trod the same

<sup>37</sup> Many interesting and useful insights about realism and imagination intermingled in many of these travel accounts: A. Durel, *L'imaginaire des épicés. Italie médiévale, Orient lointain*, Paris 2006.

<sup>38</sup> On syncretic reading habitus of Florentine readers (and writers), useful comments in D. Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance. The Patron's Oeuvre*, New Haven 2000, p. 91, and A. Perosa, *Lo zibaldone di Giovanni Rucellai*, in *Giovanni Rucellai ed il suo Zibaldone*, II, *A Florentine Patrician and his Palace*, London 1981, p. 99-152, p. 134.



paths) were driven by an impulse to leave home and hearth to enhance their possibilities for salvation. It seems that their irrepressible curiosities, their drive to see and tell what they saw were not unrelated from their penchant to acknowledge that the world beyond their *patria*'s physical borders contained curious and interesting things. It was this penchant that seems to have been absent from Syropoulos' and many other Greek visitors' observations and memories of the Councils of Ferrara and of Florence.