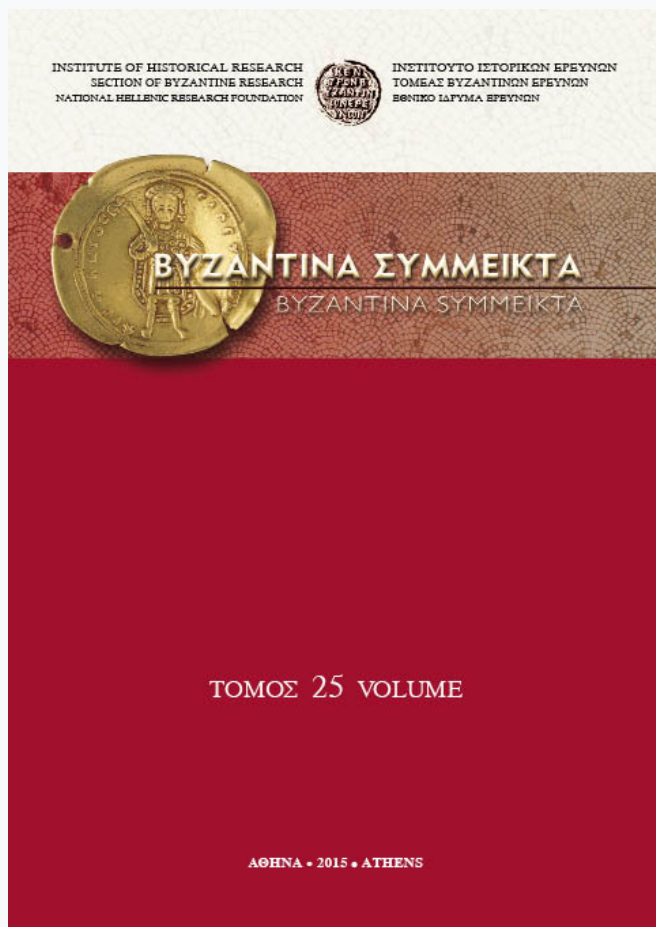


Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 25 (2015)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 25



Book Review: F. KONDYLI - V. ANDRIOPOULOU - E. PANOU - M. B. CUNNINGHAM (edd.), Sylvester Syropoulos on Politics and Culture in the Fifteenth Century Mediterranean. Themes and Problems in the Memoirs, Section IV, Ashgate 2014

Photeine PERRA

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.8621](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.8621)

To cite this article:

PERRA, P. (2016). Book Review: F. KONDYLI - V. ANDRIOPOULOU - E. PANOU - M. B. CUNNINGHAM (edd.), Sylvester Syropoulos on Politics and Culture in the Fifteenth Century Mediterranean. Themes and Problems in the Memoirs, Section IV, Ashgate 2014. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 25, 281–285. <https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.8621>

F. KONDYLI – V. ANDRIOPOULOU – E. PANOU – M. B. CUNNINGHAM (edd.), *Sylvester Syropoulos on Politics and Culture in the Fifteenth Century Mediterranean. Themes and Problems in the Memoirs, Section IV* [Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Studies, v. 16], Ashgate, 2014, pp. 248. ISBN: 978-1-4094-3966-0

One of the most important events of major political and ecclesiastical significance for Later Byzantine history, particularly of Byzantium's final turbulent decades, was the Ecclesiastical Council of Ferrara-Florence, in A.D. 1438-1439¹. This gathering of both ecclesiastical and secular personalities came up as a conclusion in a long term effort of the Byzantine Empire to protect and defend its weak status, especially in view of the rising menace of the Ottomans. Among the personalities that participated in the Council was Sylvester Syropoulos², whose point of view of the actions and decisions of the Council is reflected in his *Memoirs*, an account based on his experience as a participant and eye-witness³. This account

1. Cf. D. J. GEANAKOPOLOS, The Council of Florence (1438-39), and the Problem of Union between the Greek and Latin Churches, *Church History* 24 (1955), 324-346. J. GILL, *The Council of Florence*, Cambridge 1959 and IDEM, *Personalities of the Council of Florence*, Oxford 1964. See also K. M. SETTON, *The Papacy and the Levant*, I, Philadelphia 1976, index, and, among more recent contributions, see M.-H. BLANCHET, L'Église byzantine à la suite de l'Union de Florence (1439-1445), *BF* 29 (2007), 79-123. Ch. DENDRINOS, Reflections on the Failure of the Union of Florence, *Annuaire Historiae Conciliorum* 39 (2007), 135-152. M.-H. CONGOURDEAU, Pourquoi les Grecs ont rejeté l'Union de Florence (1438-1439), in: B. BÉTHOUART – M. FOURCADE – C. SORREL, *Identités religieuses. Dialogues et confrontations, construction et déconstruction*. [Les Cahiers du Littoral, 2, n. 9 (Carrefour d'Histoire religieuse de juillet 2008. Belley)], Boulogne, 35-46.

2. See A. PAPADAKIS, entry Syropoulos Sylvester, *ODB* 3 [1991]; cf. H. – G. BECK, *Kirche und theologische Literatur im Byzantinischen Reich*, München 1959, 759-760; H. HUNGER, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, I, München 1978, 503; *PLP*, n. 27217.

3. V. LAURENT, (ed.-French trans.), *Les 'Memoirs' du Grand Ecclésiarque de l'Église de*

is one of the major sources that inform us on the events that took place during the Council, given of course through the eyes and perspective of the author and thus sometimes characterized as somewhat partial.

Syropoulos (b. ante 1400-d. post 1453 or later), a distinguished cleric and theologian/scholar, possibly son of the *πρωτέκδικος* of the Great Church John Syropoulos, became deacon and then *μέγας ἐκκλησιάρχης* and *δικαιοφύλαξ* of the Great Church; he accompanied the patriarch Joseph II in Italy for the unionist council and, although at heart an anti-unionist, was compelled by his *basileus* (as he himself confesses in his account), i.e. by the pro-unionist emperor John VIII Palaiologos, to agree to the Union in the Ferrara-Florence Council and sign the Union's acts; upon his return to Byzantium (1440), however, he openly professed his anti-unionist sentiments, becoming an associate of Markos Eugenikos and the anti-unionist circles and refusing to collaborate with the unionist patriarchs Metrophanes II (1440-1443), the successor of Joseph II who had died in Italy, and Gregory III (1443-1450). It was only with patriarch Gennadios II-Scholarios that he collaborated later on, although it is highly improbable that he himself ascended the patriarchal throne as Sophronios I (1463-1464), between Gennadios' 2nd and 3rd terms, as it is sometimes surmised⁴.

His *Memoirs* is a most interesting text which was written after A.D. 1443 (perhaps between 1451 and 1453), while a revised version appeared later, c. 1461, when its original author may well have been dead. Until its definitive 1971 edition with French translation and commentary by V. LAURENT (see note 2), it was used by scholars in an old and incomplete edition by R. CREYGHTON, published in The Hague, in 1660⁵. Older Byzantine history accounts/manuals do not refer to it in their sections on the sources (e.g. Vasiliev or Ostrogorsky), while it was D. NICOL who was among the first scholars to include it in his main sources when publishing his authoritative account on *The last centuries of Byzantium, 1261-1453* (London 1972; 2nd ed. Cambridge 1993). Suffice it here to say that even the late J. Gill, an authority on the 1438-1439 Council had not at his disposal Laurent's new edition both in his 1959 monograph on the Council as well as in his 1964 essay

Constantinople, Sylvestre Syropoulos, sur le Concile de Florence (1438-1439), Paris, CNRS, 1971.

4. See e.g. O. KRESTEN, entry 'Syropoulos', *Lexikon des Mittelalters* VIII. 2 (1996), col. 387.

5. *Vera historia unionis non verae inter Graecos et Latinos: sive concilii Florentini exactissima narratio...*, Magae Comitum 1660.

on Syropoulos, in his *Personalities* (refs in note 1). On the other hand, the new edition has provided grounds for further important studies on Syropoulos and his text⁶, while the latter's importance for contemporary events is acknowledged in Byzantine historiography manuals⁷. An interesting example is the diplomatic mission of the Constantinopolitan official Andronikos Iagares by emperor John VIII Palaiologos (1425/01-1448) to the Grand Komnenian emperor of Trebizond, John IV (1429-1458/60), in A.D. 1436 –only Syropoulos' *Memoirs* mentions this mission and it is interesting to contemplate here that John IV's father and predecessor, Alexios IV Grand Komnenos (1416/17-149), had married his exquisitely beautiful daughter Maria to the Palaiologos John VIII himself, in 1426/27, according to Doukas⁸ and Sphrantzes⁹.

In the case of the present collective volume under review, Sylvester Syropoulos's personality works as the starting point and the springboard for a more general study and presentation of some aspects of political and cultural life in the late medieval Mediterranean. As it is explained, it came up as corollary of a colloquium entitled *Sailing from Byzantium: Themes and Problems in Sylvester Syropoulos' Memoirs, Book IV*, which was held at University of Birmingham, in June 2009. The contributors offer their experience in their respective fields by covering a wide spectrum of topics concerning art, historiography, and diplomacy and travel culture.

In the introduction the objective of the volume is analyzed with a further attempt to provide an answer to the obvious question, i.e. if Syropoulos's account can be trusted as a primary source; the introduction goes further by providing the historical framework of his era by drawing an historical retrospect focusing on

6. See e.g. J.-L. van DIETEN, Silvester Syropoulos und die Vorgeschichte von Ferrara-Florenz, *Annuario historiae conciliorum* 9 (1977), 154-179; IDEM, Zu den zwei Fassungen der Memoiren des Silvester Syropoulos, *Annuario historiae conciliorum* 11 (1979), 367-395.

7. See J. KARAYANNOPOULOS – G. WEISS, *Quellenkunde zur Geschichte von Byzanz, 324-1453*, Wiesbaden 1982, 535-536 (no. 575).

8. *Ducas, Istoria turco-bizantină (1341-1462)*, ed. V. GRECU, Bucuresti 1958, 139.

9. Ed. V. GRECU, *Georgios Sphrantzes, Memorii 1401-1477*, Bucuresti 1966, 20 (Minus) and 262 (Majus); *Giorgio Sfranze Cronaca*, a cura di RICCARDO MAISANO (CFHB 29), Roma 1990, 30. Cf. ed. LAURENT (see note 2), 162, 166; F. DÖLGER, *Regesten der Kaiserurkunden des oströmischen Reiches*, V (1965), 113 (n. 3421). On that marriage see further refs in A. SAVVIDES, *Oi Μεγάλοι Κομνηνοί της Τραπεζούντας και του Πόντου (1204-1461)*, Athens 2005, 117 note 253, 151-152 and 176, note 363.

the political and diplomatic situation before the Union Council, so that the reader comprehends the limits and the conditions within which Syropoulos was called upon to operate. Apart from that, it is also making a general overview introducing the reader to the themes that the following essays are addressing.

The book is structured in ten chapters/essays. Each one, is a self-sufficient essay that explores and presents a subject, with several aspects connected to the Council and the Union of the Churches, having as its core the narrations and remarks of Syropoulos. In the first essay (M. B. CUNNINGHAM, *Sylvester Syropoulos: the author and his outlook*, pp. 9-21) there is an attempt to raise questions and argue on them about the way that Sylvester Syropoulos wrote his account. In the second essay (E. A. ZACHARIADOU, *The Ottomans, the Greek Orthodox Church and the perils of the Papacy*, pp. 23-32) we are introduced to the world of the 15th century as it appears according to the words of Syropoulos and more specifically the political evolutions that defined the decision for the Union of the Churches and the sentiments that caused this decision not only to the lower clergy but to the Greek Orthodox population as well. The third essay (R. PRICE, *Precedence and Papal primacy*, pp. 33-47) is dedicated to the complex relations issue among the Pope, the Patriarch and the Byzantine Emperor, it analyzes the problem of their precedence not only as a matter of protocol but also as a matter of substance. In the fourth essay (V. ANDRIOPOULOU, *The Logistics of a Union: Diplomatic Communication through the Eyes of Sylvester Syropoulos*, pp. 49-67) focuses on the narration of Syropoulos as a valuable source for the exploration of the diplomatic affairs of the 15th century and more specifically of the Byzantine diplomacy of the time.

Another interesting aspect of the Ferrara-Florence Council is that dealing with accommodation facilities and the cost of life for the Greek delegation during their stay in the city of Ferrara, in 1438. In the fifth essay (T. DEAN, *City, Marquis, Pope, Doge: Ferrara in 1438*, pp. 69-77) Syropoulos's point of view on the subject is elaborately presented, and that view is certainly negative for the city as well as for the reception that the Ferrarans reserved for the Greek delegation. His testimony is put under critical light, as he describes the events that took place before and during the Council's assignments in Ferrara. In the course of his sojourn in Italy, Syropoulos had the chance to visit Latin Churches, yet as he clearly demonstrates in a passage of his account, it was very difficult for him to act as a venerator. If we follow Syropoulos's steps, we can then face the icons more as pieces of art. In the sixth essay (A. WEYL CARR, *Labelling images, venerating icons in Sylvester Syropoulos's world*, pp. 79-106) we get a chance to look upon the art of Syropoulos's

era as a particular moment in art history. More specifically, we can understand how ecclesiastical art was influenced at the time of the Council as well as its effect on the artistic traditions of Byzantium and the West, too.

In the seventh essay (N. D. KONTOGIANNIS, What did Syropoulos miss? Appreciating the art of the Lippomano Chapel in Venetian Negroponte, pp. 107-134), we remain in the sphere of art, as we are introduced to the esoteric parts of Lippomano Church, in Negroponte/Chalkis, which symbolizes at some point the interaction between Greeks and Latins in the area of the Aegean, during the medieval era. The city of Negroponte was under Venetian rule by the time Syropoulos arrived there, as the Greek delegation was travelling from Constantinople to Italy; in his account our writer characteristically refers to the prohibition imposed by the Emperor to the members of the Greek mission to stay in the Venetian castle. The eighth essay (F. KONDYLI, The logistics of a Union: The traveling arrangements and the journey to Venice, pp. 135-153) provides us with useful information concerning the transportation of the Byzantine delegation to the West, as it appears in Syropoulos's account. Her narration gives us a description of the journey and the conditions under which it was possible to travel in 15th-century Mediterranean. The ninth essay on the other hand (N. BUDAK, On Syropoulos's Dalmatian and Istrian route, pp. 155-173), focuses on Syropoulos's account concerning the areas of Dalmatia and Istria as important places for the history of Balkans, while finally the tenth essay [E. PANOU, The Ideological Function of Colour in Byzantine Historiography and Chronicles (Thirteen-Fifteenth Centuries), pp. 175-184] is devoted to the symbolic use of colours like red, purple and scarlet in Byzantine sources and more specifically in Syropoulos's case.

All in all, we could safely deduce that the present volume, which also contains an English translation of Syropoulos' *Memoires*, section IV (based on V. Laurent's 1971 edition), sums up our knowledge on Sylvester Syropoulos's life and times, with insights regarding his personality, offering at the same time reflections and portrayals of his era in a vivid description of 15th-century Mediterranean politics and art, while another crucial denominator of the volume deals with the background contrast between Greeks and Latins in view of the Ottoman threat.

PHOTEINE V. PERRA
Johannesburg