



Greek Studies in Italy: From Petrarch to Bruni

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GREEK STUDIES IN ITALY:
FROM PETRARCH TO BRUNI

Comparing with the mind's eye the revival of Greek studies that took place in Avignon and Florence in the middle decades of the fourteenth century with the second revival that began in Florence three decades later, two large problems of historical interpretation stand out, which have not yet, I hope, entirely exhausted their interest—even after the valuable studies of Giuseppe Cammelli, R. J. Leonertz, Roberto Weiss, Agostino Pertusi, N. G. Wilson, Ernesto Berti, and many others. The first problem concerns the reason why (to use Pertusi's formulation) Salutati succeeded where Boccaccio failed: why no Latin scholar of the mid-fourteenth century succeeded in learning classical Greek, whereas the students of Manuel Chrysoloras were able not only to learn Greek themselves, but to pass down their knowledge to later generations. The second problem has to do with the marked difference in the aims and interests of the two revivals. For Petrarch and Boccaccio, a knowledge of Greek was chiefly desired because it would give access to Greek poetry, especially Homer, though familiarity with the Platonic dialogues was also an aspiration. For Salutati and his circle, however, Homer was relegated to the background, and attention was focussed instead on prose authors writing history, biography,

oratory and moral philosophy. The favorite authors of Chrysoloras and his students were Plutarch, Demosthenes, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, Lucian and Ptolemy, rather than Homer and the tragedians, upon whom Pilato lectured. My paper today will address both of these issues: the reasons for the greater success of the *seconda grecità*, and the reasons why it differed so strongly in its cultural orientation from the *prima grecità* of Petrarch and Boccaccio, Barlaam and Pilato.

This of course is not to imply that these questions have not been addressed before—far from it. In fact, the existing scholarly literature provides us with a number of useful explanations. The older literature, exemplified by Pierre de Nolhac and Giuseppe Cammelli, in general tended to explain Barlaam's and Pilato's failure and Chrysoloras' success in terms of the character, skills and attainments of the individuals involved.¹ Petrarch's vivid description of Pilato's repulsive appearance and character, only partly balanced by Boccaccio's more positive account, obviously weighed heavily in accounting for the Calabrian's failures as a Greek teacher, though after the researches of Pertusi it is no longer so easy to dismiss his attainments as a Hellenist.² On the other hand, there is no description of Chrysoloras which does not praise his kindness, charm and noble dignity as well as his extensive knowledge of literature. He was clearly an inspirational figure. Equally clearly, he was a much better teacher than either Barlaam or Pilato. Pilato's method, as illuminated by Pertusi, seems to have been to plunge directly into Homer and Euripides, two difficult authors, wading through them by means of translation, paraphrase and gloss. There is no evidence that he provided his Western students with even a minimal introduction to grammar. Chrysoloras on the other hand was clever enough to present his auditors with a brief but organic view of Greek accidence and syntax in his *Erotemata*. In this work, as N. G. Wilson has pointed out, the complexities of late Byzantine grammar were

carefully reduced to a minimum so as not to blunt the ardor of his young disciples, who were burning to confront the famous Greek authors directly.³ One might add that Chrysoloras also eased access to Greek by developing a new, much simpler style of script that could be readily mastered by his Italian disciples. Chrysoloras was, finally, wise enough to start his Italian disciples on simpler prose texts like Lucian and Xenophon, and this is surely one reason, though not the only reason, for the concentration of the *seconda grecità* on prose authors. The practice of studying prose before poetry, Xenophon before Sophocles, is one that has lasted down to modern times in Western educational practice.

A similar contrast might be drawn between the the Latin students of the mid-trecento and those of the early quattrocento. If Boccaccio's enthusiasm for Greek cannot be faulted, his attitude was not shared by Petrarch. As Roberto Weiss pointed out half a century ago, Petrarch had strong prejudices against Greek culture, some inherited from Cicero, others acquired from his own contemporary experience. Like Cicero he regarded the ancient Greeks as vain and boastful, marked by *levitas graecanica*, and insufficiently respectful of Latin cultural achievements. For himself, he was convinced that Virgil was superior to Homer and Cicero to Demosthenes. Petrarch also shared the distaste of some of his contemporaries for what he saw as Byzantine arrogance and infidelity to Christian orthodoxy. He had no desire to visit Greece and advised his secretary Giovanni Malpaghini against going there to learn Greek, recommending instead that he visit Calabria. Reacting against the Romantic view of Petrarch, sighing over the Greek manuscripts of Homer and Plato he could not read, Weiss argued plausibly that Petrarch had plenty of opportunities to learn Greek and could have learned the language had he really wanted to.⁴

Contrast Petrarch's attitude with that of the students of Chrysoloras. If Bruni seems at times to share some of Petrarch's (or rather Cicero's) prejudices about the Greeks, his famous description of the nights he spent sleeplessly repeating Chrysoloras' lessons in his head, in sheer excitement at the prospect of meeting Homer and Demosthenes and Plato face to face, permits no doubts about his genuine zeal for learning the language.⁵ Nor may one doubt his personal devotion to Chrysoloras. Even more striking is the case of Guarino, the first in a long line of humanists to spend an extended period in Constantinople in order to learn classical Greek. He hero-worshipped Chrysoloras and had a warm friendship with Manuel II Paleologus that may have extended to political support of the Greek cause in Venice.⁶ Marianne Pade has indeed argued that Guarino's early translations of Plutarch disclose a marked tendency for modern Venetians to identify themselves with the ancient Athenians, who like themselves were masters of a maritime empire in the eastern Mediterranean.⁷ This intense philhellenism among Latin students of Greek, whose broader context we shall return to below, was an important new element in the *seconda grecità*.

While understanding the attitudes and skills of the leading personalities takes us some way towards explaining the different interests and outcomes of the two Greek revivals, it is clear that this style of explanation is far from saving all the phenomena. So it was natural that postwar students of Renaissance Hellenism such as Roberto Weiss and Agostino Pertusi sought to deepen understanding of Trecento Greek studies by examining their wider cultural context, paying particular attention to the learned traditions of southern Italy and Paleologan Byzantium in which Western students of Greek were nurtured. Weiss' researches into the Italo-Greek culture of medieval Italy disclosed a world dominated by a few monastic centers, especially the Basilian

monasteries at Casole and Rossano.⁸ At these centers a limited interest in the classical heritage was overshadowed by a much deeper commitment to the study of Orthodox liturgy, sacred letters and theology. The papal court of the time also showed an interest in Greek letters, but mostly for the purpose of engaging in theological controversy and missions; literature was at best a marginal interest. The court of King Robert d'Anjou of Naples, the greatest center of Greek studies in the early fourteenth century, was similarly uninterested in Greek literature; its translators concentrated their efforts on works of theology, medicine and other sciences. Weiss went so far as to posit a kind of cultural rivalry between poets like Boccaccio and the translators of scientific works. Whatever the truth of this supposition, it seems undeniable that the orientation of Italo-Greek learning in the early fourteenth century could hardly be described as literary. It is no surprise, then, that poets and literary men such as Petrarch and Boccaccio failed to find among the epigones of these medieval learned traditions a teacher in Chrysoloras's mold who could inspire them with a true love of Greek letters.

As Pertusi pointed out with great clarity, the cultural matrix which produced Chrysoloras was very different in its orientation.⁹ The world of the Paleologan Renaissance, vividly glimpsed in the letters of Demetrius Cydones, Manuel Calecas, Manuel II Paleologus, and Chrysoloras himself, is one that displays a true literary sensibility, if not great creative force. These are men who write in an Atticizing Greek modelled on Libanius and the writers of the Second Sophistic. Their writings are peppered with classical quotations and allusions; contemporary persons and places hide under classical disguises; their favorite authors are Homer, Demosthenes, Plato, Thucydides, and Plutarch. They see themselves as keeping alive in parlous times an ancient literary tradition which is both a mark of personal distinction and an intrinsic part of their

identity as Greeks. Like the humanists of the Counter-Reformation, they saw their classical studies as passionless intermundia where men of good will could live in harmony, however intense their political and religious quarrels in the lower world. In short, the role of classical literature among the Paleologan elite bore a certain resemblance to the role that classical literature was already beginning to play in the city-state culture of Renaissance Italy. This being the case, it is no accident that Italian men of letters who studied with Chrysoloras found the teachings of their Byzantine master so much more in harmony with their own prepossessions.

One may point to other elements in the late Byzantine world that helped cement the marriage between Italian and Greek culture around 1400.¹⁰ One very evident precondition was the growing alienation of Greek intellectuals from the more intransigent forms of Orthodoxy in the period after the condemnation of Barlaam and the anti-Palamites (1351). Some Palamites rejected any accommodation with Latin Christendom as tantamount to heresy; some even went so far as to state their preference for living under Ottoman rule rather than yielding to pressure to submit to Rome. Byzantine literary gentlemen, on the other hand, tended to regard the defense of Greece as more important than preserving minor dogmatic distinctions between East and West. An extreme case was that of Pletho, who came very close to giving up Christianity entirely, and in any case wanted to see a radical reform of Orthodoxy, which would include a state takeover of monastic property and a return to Hellenic greatness. Other intellectuals, including Demetrius Cydones and all of the *dotti bizantini* who taught in the West, converted to Catholicism and worked tirelessly to obtain Western aid against the Turk.

So while it is true that Barlaam and Atumano and probably Pilato were also converts to Catholicism, by 1400 the Latinophron party played a much more important and self-conscious

role in Byzantine diplomatic relations with the West. This meant that Latin students could feel more at ease politically with their Byzantine teachers, but the more important result was that the spread of Greek culture became a kind of missionary activity, as the cases of Chrysoloras, and later Bessarion, show. While Pilato was willing after some persuasion to teach Homer to interested Italians—probably with a view to using Petrarch's influence to obtain ecclesiastical preferment—Chrysoloras and Bessarion were passionately devoted to the task of transplanting Greek letters onto Italian soil. They made it their conscious aim to turn classical Greek into the second learned language of Western Europe. Their goal was to demonstrate to the Latins that ancient Graeco-Roman culture was indeed one culture, just as Orthodoxy and Catholicism were at bottom one religion. They hoped that by so doing they could deepen the sense of loyalty and commitment to Greece felt by the educated classes of Italy. Chrysoloras and his master, Manuel Paleologus, as later Bessarion, had learned by bitter personal experience that the crusading ardor of Europe was difficult to reignite, and if they remembered (as they undoubtedly did) the sad outcome of the Fourth Crusade, they would have been wary of unleashing such ardor in any case. To nurture Western European's sense of identity with Greek culture would be a far safer course. And their efforts met with some success. For thanks to their advocacy, the idea of the defense of Greece and the common classical heritage ultimately became, by the mid-fifteenth century, an important topic in humanist crusading rhetoric, above all in the writings of Pius II.¹¹

Chrysoloras' eagerness to adapt his teaching to the needs and prejudices of his Italian audience is best seen in the well-known letter he wrote to Salutati in 1397.¹² Here he emphasizes the need to understand Greek literature in order to make progress in Latin, a theme that his students Bruni and Guarino would continue to echo for half a century. In the official invitation

to Chrysoloras to teach at the Florentine studium Salutati had proudly repeated Cicero's assertion that *omnia nostros aut invenisse per se sapientius quam Graecos aut accepta ab illis fecisse meliora*, a judgement that would surely have made an earlier generation of Byzantines bridle.¹³ But in Chrysoloras' letter to Salutati the Byzantine diplomat smoothly agreed with Cicero that Latin was not inferior to Greek, while pointing out that Cicero had also set an example for the Latins by his own mastery of Greek literature. Knowing Salutati's interest in Roman history, he also drew attention to the fact that there were more works of Roman history in Greek than in Latin (*kai nun de oimai pleiona par hemin ton umeteron istorian einai tuxon e par'umin*). This, again, was an assertion that would be frequently repeated by Bruni in later years as well as by Pier Paolo Vergerio, another student of Chrysoloras, in his popular educational treatise, *De ingenuis moribus*.¹⁴ We must also suppose that Chrysoloras' well-known advocacy of *ad sententiam* translation (in a preface of 1416 to Cencio de' Rustici) was likewise undertaken in the full knowledge that Salutati's circle had long championed this freer, more literary method of rendering Greek into Latin. No doubt Chrysoloras would have approved of any technique that could increase the appeal of Greek literature in the Italian environment, but he must also have been aware that this method had already become standard in the most advanced literary circles of Italy.¹⁵

To say this, however, reminds us that to account for the evolution of Greek studies between the time of Petrarch and that of Salutati we must take Italy into account as well as Greece. We must not forget that the world of Italian humanism was also changing in the thirty years following Pilato's lectures in Florence. The most important new developments in the humanist movement since the time of Petrarch and Boccaccio were the beginnings of the

humanist school and introduction of humanist culture into the public sphere of the Italian city-state.¹⁶ Both of these developments are highly relevant to understanding the character of Greek studies in the early quattrocento. Both sprang from an increasing conviction that humanistic studies were not only pleasurable and a means of acquiring personal distinction, but were also vital tools for the recovery of ancient virtue and for the reform of contemporary culture, politics and society in accordance with ancient models. The emerging humanist school revealed this new orientation. However conservative its curriculum and methods,¹⁷ the new educational theories being elaborated by Vergerio, Bruni, Guarino and Barzizza argued for the importance of classical studies as a means to revive and spread ancient wisdom and virtue throughout the contemporary world. At the same time, beginning with the efforts of Vergerio in Padua, the practice of public oratory in Latin was being revived, especially on ceremonial occasions such as weddings, funerals, the presentation of ambassadorial credentials, the inauguration of university lecture courses, and the formal entries into office of public officials such as the podestà. By the second decade of the fifteenth century it was also becoming common to quote classical authorities, particularly Sallust and Plutarch, while giving counsel before the Florentine Signoria.¹⁸ Classical studies no longer were simply the pastime of a few circles of amateur enthusiasts; they had become a necessary part of the training of future princes, diplomats and statesmen.

Though (as I have argued elsewhere) it is a mistake to see this new civic humanism as a phenomenon confined to republican city-states,¹⁹ the impact it had on Greek studies is most obvious in the case of the republican thinker Leonardo Bruni. Bruni's translations of Xenophon's *Hiero*, seven lives from Plutarch, and his so-called *Corpus Demosthenicum* all breathe the new air of commitment to public life. Five of Bruni's Plutarchan lives are of famous republican

heroes, while his version of the life of Pyrrhus deals with an important period of Roman republican history (even if its eponymous subject is non-Roman). Bruni's version of the life of Demosthenes was paired with his own new life of Cicero, which had the aim of reversing Plutarch's judgement preferring the Greek to the Latin orator. The life of Demosthenes in some manuscripts also accompanies the collection of Demosthenic orations Bruni translated during his years as papal secretary. This contained Demosthenes' *De corona* with the speech of Aeschines to which it responds, as well as the *Olynthiac* orations, two pseudonymous epistles attributed to Philip of Macedon and the Athenian assembly, together with arguments extracted from the *Hypotheseis* of Libanius. The whole corpus served to bring alive for Latin readers the great period when democratic Athens struggled to maintain her independence against King Philip. Though by translating the paired speeches of Demosthenes and Aeschines Bruni was in effect completing the lost or unfinished project of Cicero's *De optimo genere oratorum*, it can hardly be doubted that it was Bruni's civic humanism that lay behind his interest in Plutarch's statesmen and Athenian oratory of the classical period.²⁰

Having emphasized for most of this paper the differences between the Greek revivals of the mid- and late Trecento, I should like to conclude by pointing out briefly some of the continuities. One common element in both revivals is the subordination of Greek to Latin culture. The statement of Francesco Filelfo in 1428 that "we all desire to learn Greek letters, not to make use of them among the Athenians and the Byzantines, but so that with their help and guidance we may acquire a better and more polished command of Latin literature and eloquence,"²¹ would have earned the approval of Petrarch eighty years earlier as readily as that of Poliziano a half century later. Throughout the Italian Renaissance, Greek was always learned

primarily for the enrichment of neo-Roman culture; Cicero's perspective on Greek culture remained the dominant one. Another continuity was the role of Greek in the defense of the humanities against its detractors. Just as Bruni used St Basil's letter *ad adolescentes* to defend the humanities during the early Quattrocento—in what was probably the most widely-read work of Greek literature in the Renaissance—so Boccaccio in the fourteenth century used the quotations of Homer in the *Corpus iuris civilis* to argue for the wisdom and authority of the ancient poets and the utility of studying them.²² Finally, the interest in Plato throughout the Italian Renaissance, from the time of Petrarch to the time of Ficino and beyond, is a great constant. If Petrarch gives us an academic skeptic Plato, undermining the dogmatism of the Aristotelians; if Barlaam gives us a Dionysian and Proclan Plato;²³ if Bruni sees Plato as a civic humanist and Ficino sees him as an ancient theologian, nearly all students of Plato in every phase of the Italian Renaissance accepted the view of St Augustine that Plato was the closest of all ancient thinkers to Christianity, and was therefore an acceptable handmaiden of Christian theology.²⁴ It was no doubt for this reason that the recovery and translation of the Platonic corpus into Latin, wished for by Petrarch and Boccaccio, begun by Bruni, Chrysoloras and Uberto Decembrio, and brought to completion by Ficino, remained the greatest single achievement of Italian Renaissance scholarship.²⁵

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NOTES TO HANKINS PAPER

¹ P. DE NOLHAC, Petrarque et l'Humanisme, Paris 1907²; rpt. 1965;
G. CAMMELLI, Manuele Crisolora, i dotti bizantini e le origini
dell'Umanesimo, Florence 1941.

² PETRARCH, Sen. III.vi; BOCCACCIO, Gen. XV.vi. See G. BILLANOVICH,
Petrarca letterato: Lo scrittoio del Petrarca, Rome 1947, p.
245; A. PERTUSI, Leonzio Pilato fra Petrarca e Boccaccio, Venice-
Rome 1964.

³ N. G. WILSON, From Byzantium to Italy: Greek Studies in the
Italian Renaissance, Baltimore 1992, p. 9.

⁴R. WEISS, Medieval and Humanist Greek, Padua 1977, p. 179: "Si
può insomma dire che se il Petrarca non imparò il greco fu
proprio perché non lo volle imparare."

⁵ BRUNI, Rerum suo tempore gestarum commentarius, ed. C. DI PIERRO,
RIS² XIX.3, Bologna 1926, pp. 431-432.

⁶G. T. DENNIS, The Letters of Manuel II Paleologus, Washington,
D.C., 1977, p. 168.

⁷M. PADE, Sulla fortuna delle «Vite» di Plutarco nell'umanesimo italiano del Quattrocento, «Fontes: Rivista di filologia, iconografia, e storia della tradizione classica» I (1998), pp. 101-116, esp. 109-111.

⁸ R. WEISS, The Greek Culture of South Italy in the Later Middle Ages, in Medieval and Humanist Greek, pp. 13-43.

⁹PERTUSI, Pilato, p. 478: "C'è tuttavia una grossa differenza: i Crisolora ed i Pletoni diffondono in Italia il gusto costantinopolitano e la cultura costantinopolitano, Barlaam e Leonzio il gusto e la cultura dell'Italia meridionale."

¹⁰ On this issue see further J. HANKINS, Lo studio del greco nell'Occidente latino, in I Greci: Storia Cultura Arte Società. 3. I Greci oltre la Grecia, ed. Salvatore SETTIS, Turin 2001, 1245-1262.

¹¹See J. HANKINS, Renaissance Crusaders: Humanist Crusade Literature in the Age of Mehmed II, «Dumbarton Oaks Papers» XLIX (1995), pp. 111-207, reprinted in J. HANKINS, Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance, vol. 1, Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2003.

¹²SALUTATI, Epistolario, ed. F. NOVATI, 4 vols., Rome 1891-1911, IV, pp. 333-344. On this letter see the perceptive discussion of E. BERTI, Manuele Crisolora, Plutarco, e l'avviamento delle traduzioni umanistiche «Fontes: Rivista di filologia, iconografia e storia della tradizione classica» I (1998), pp. 88-91; on p. 88 Berti writes, "Non dobbiamo trascurare che i pensieri del Crisolora ... vengono sviluppati in relazione agli interesse specifici del suo interlocutore e con estrema attenzione all'ambiente italiano in cui lo scrivente si era trasferito."

¹³A. GHERARDI, Statuti della Universita e studio fiorentino dell'anno MCCCLXXXVII seguiti da un'appendice di documenti dall'MCCCXX al MCCCCLXXII, Florence 1881, p. 365.

¹⁴Humanist Educational Treatises, ed. C. KALLENDORF (I Tatti Renaissance Library, 5), Cambridge, Mass., 2002, p. 46 (cap. 39): "Et est eo deventum ut latinae quoque historiae et cognitionem et fidem a graecis auctoribus exigamus; plurima namque talium quae apud nos sunt aut anguste perscripta aut prorsus incognita, late apud eos diffusa reperiuntur."

¹⁵ See BERTI, Manuele Crisolora, pp. 88-91.

¹⁶On the latter development see now the important book of R. G. WITT, In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni, Leiden-London 2000.

¹⁷See R. BLACK, Humanism and Education in Medieval and Renaissance Italy, Cambridge 2001.

¹⁸G. BRUCKER, The Civic World of Renaissance Florence, Princeton 1977, pp. 290-293.

¹⁹ See Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections, ed. J. HANKINS, Cambridge 2000, and especially my article De republica: Civic Humanism in Renaissance Milan (and Other Renaissance Signories), forthcoming in the proceedings of the conference I Decembrio e la tradizione della «Repubblica» di Platone tra Medioevo e Umanesimo, Pavia and Vigevano, 24-27 May 2000.

²⁰ See J. HANKINS, Chrysoloras and the Greek Studies of Leonardo Bruni, in Manuele Crisolora e il ritorno del greco in occidente, Naples 2002, pp. 181-209.

²¹Quoted by BERTI, Manuele Crisolora, p. 82n.

²²Gen. deor. XIV.19; see F. DI BENEDETTO, Leonzio Pilato e le Pandette, «IMU», XII (1969), pp. 53-112.

²³R. E. SINKIEWICZ, The Solutions addressed to George Lapithes by Barlaam the Calabrian and their Philosophical Context, «Mediaeval Studies», XLIII (1981), pp. 151-201.

²⁴Augustine's view was also, interestingly, endorsed by Demetrius CYDONES in a letter written c. 1371/74 to the Empress Helena (Demetrius Cydonius: Correspondance, ed. R. J. LOENERTZ, I, pp.

A horizontal row of 26 small, square decorative icons. Each icon contains a stylized, symmetrical pattern resembling a calligraphic letter or a floral motif. The patterns are unique for each position, likely corresponding to the letters A through Z.

²⁵In general, see J. HANKINS, Plato in the Italian Renaissance, 2 vols., London-Leiden 1990, reprint with corrections 1991, 1994.