

Exodus of Byzantium Scholars and Artists

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Abstract: The Byzantine Empire, a bone in the throat of Sultan Mehmet II vanished. The scholars faced the tragic alternative to embrace Islam or to flee. The contact of the scholars with the Italian environment foreshadow an intellectual movement that would reach a special intensity in the decades to come. Greek language and literature were then studied at the University of Padua and other places. The Renaissance humanism perceived Byzantine culture as the core knowledge of classics ancient literature. Byzantine artists dwelled for the creation of icons and mosaics: a theology written images. Yet, iconoclasm changed the setting during years. Icons and mosaics developed and exerted influence on the masters of early Renaissance and Islamic art. Byzantium was considered by many ‘Western states’ as the last light of civilization due to the inheritance legacy of Rome and its cultural sophistication.

Keyword: Exodus, scholars, Greek, literature, icons, mosaics, symbolism, iconoclasm.

The Byzantine Empire experienced several cycles of growth and decay over nearly a thousand years. The decline of the empire began in the 11th century. Civil wars, internal fights contributed to the Byzantium decline which coincided with catastrophic reduction in land and power. The rise of the Ottomans in Anatolia conquered the former Byzantine heartland over the course of the 14th and 15th centuries. In 1453, after 7 weeks of tremendous perils, of fierce battles on sea and land, Byzantium was finally vanquished. It was “la bataille de la mort”. Byzantium loomed then vanished. Constantinople, the New Rome, the Jewel of Byzantium, a bone in the throat of Sultan Mehmet II evaporated. What happened to the Byzantium scholars and artists? This is what this article is about.

Byzantine Emperors started travelling in Europe mainly Italy, asking for help against the imposing power of the Turks before the deadly attack in 1453, hoping of receiving military and financial aid, but in vain. During the second half of the 14th century, Byzantine territory was divided between Emperor John the 5th and his sons. During this time, Murad I was coordinating the Balkan actions into Adrianople. The Ottoman pressure became unbearable and the people of Thrace and Macedonia faced the tragic alternative to embrace Islam or be deprived of their goods and forced to flee.

During the contacts between Orthodox Orient and the West, a movement of cultural values and intellectuals from Christian East to Western Europe took place. The Byzantine scholar Demetrios Cydones (theologian and influential state man) left his career as a minister and spent his time at the Manganes monastery where he became acquainted with the work of Thomas Aquinas which led him to embrace Catholicism. The contact with the Italian environment determined the Byzantine scholar to foreshadow an intellectual movement that would reach a special intensity in the decades to come. Manuel Chrysoloras, a student of Cydones, undertook a diplomatic mission in Italy (1394) to ask for help against the Turks, but his diplomatic mission failed. Yet his intellectual verve fascinated the Italians and he taught Greek language and culture to a group of humanists representing early Renaissance such as L. Bruni, P. Bracciolini and G. Da Verona. His intellectual capacities were strongly felt in the formation of the Platonic Academy. M. Chrysolotas was the first Byzantine scholar to inaugurate adequate teaching of Greek in Italy, starting the new phase of bilingual Renaissance.

The movement of Byzantine intellectuals toward Italy increased gradually between the Council of Florence and 1453 which appeared as an exodus. Among a group formed around Cardinal Bessarion, a mediator between the East and West in the years following the Council of Florence, was Theodor Gaza. Gaza was a teacher and translator from Greek to Latin and visa-versa. Demetrios Chalcondyles began teaching Greek at Perugia and became the first professor of Greek studies at the University of Padua.

In the middle of the 15th century, Cardinal Bessarion was the most popular Greek in Italy by virtue of his outstanding cultural activities and as head of the academy in Rome. He was also a collector of Greek manuscripts which formed the nucleus of Marciana Library in Venice. His obsession as a collector of Greek manuscripts was mainly due to the collections hosted by the Imperial library of Byzantium which suffered in

1204 of the ransack of the 4th crusade and destroyed in 1453 by the Ottomans. Monasteries in southern Italy and Sicily held collections that survived the collapse of Byzantium. These collections were object of studies in the Italian Renaissance. The Byzantine historian Doukas revealed that after the fall of Constantinople, the Turks loaded various goods and books of Aristotle, Plato, theology and sold them for a nickel.

A further intellectual presence was G. Gemisto Plethon who astonished his contemporaries by his knowledge. He brought to the cultural circuit of the West, Strabo (a geographer among other expertises) who spoke of the possibility of sailing round Africa and believed in the existence of a territory East of India. His writings were translated into Latin in 1458 and influenced the geographical discoveries in the 15th century. The Renaissance humanism perceived the Byzantine culture as the core knowledge of classics ancient literature. In the middle of the 15th century other personalities arrived in Italy and made outstanding contribution to the development of Greek studies. In the decade preceding the collapse of Constantinople, another group of Byzantine intellectuals arrived: Michael Ason, Constantine Lascaris, Alexios Caladenos, and John Argyropoulos. The latest exerted a great influence on Italian intellectuals.

After May 29th 1453, Byzantine population was taken by various Western countries. Traditional center of Greek studies was mainly Florence, and Venice was the natural outlet of the refugees. In the late 15th and early 16th centuries, Venice became the relay of Hellenism in Europe. In 1478 the estimated number of Greeks in the city of Saint Mark was 4000 and towards the end of the century the number became 10.000 out of a total of 110 000 inhabitants. The refugees were of different professions: teachers, diplomats and artists who played important role in terms of number and prestige. However, Greek studies had little impact on countries in Western Europe such as England. It is only in the 16th century that Greek literature and language entered higher education. Yet, the cultural movement of the 15th and 16th centuries in the West cannot be separated from Byzantine intellects.

Although an important part of the Byzantine immigrants took part before the collapse of Constantinople, the arrival of Greek intellectuals was connected to the desire of the Italian elite to get acquainted with Greek literature directly or through translation. Hence, Greeks took over the role of teachers, copyists and translators. Most of the immigrants were unionists and supporters of the Latin Church as religious debate was continuously a battlefield in Byzantium. Many opted for Catholicism and the acceptance of papal supremacy, for that was the price of the liberation from the rule of the barbarians and prosperity to the Greeks. This was the belief of the Byzantine historian Doukas. In fact, the opposition to the church union was a major issue of the Greeks before and even on the eve of the collapse of the imperial city under the Ottomans.

One might blame the Byzantine for their continuous debate on the Christian dogma rather than caring for the administration and political harmony within the Empire. Yet the obsession of faith was not only in Byzantium but rather, in what is at present named Europe, during the Middle Ages. In fact, Kavakes (a philosopher) being in Italy warned the West not to be weakened as the Byzantine had been by internal enmity and not to lose control of the sea which can be a bridge and a barrier.

Byzantine intellectuals were seen by Italian humanists as descendants of Plato and Aristotle rather than Renaissance humanists. This approach of thinking could be due to the fact that Greeks coming from Eastern Orthodox revealed a strong inclination towards ancient Greek culture. Thus, knowledge of classical culture and imitation of ancient models were common elements of Byzantine intellectuals in Italy. For instance, Laonicos Chalcondyles (an intellectual coming from Athenian elite) was a passionate imitator of Thucydides (Greek historian). Demetrios Chalcondyles, a cousin of Laonicos also an Athenian elite, wrote about the main reason of the rise of Venice which was due to the constant refugees coming from the Byzantine world. The city of Venice became very rich and endowed the city with valuable buildings and magnificent churches. Many Greek intellectuals integrated themselves into the Western world by adopting Catholicism, but kept their attachment to Byzantium. Probably, it is with the second generation that the attachment to the West would prevail. Although Byzantine intellectuals and the Italians found mutual discourse on the debate on Christian dogma and the passion for values of classical antiquity, the Byzantines remained in a position of social marginality. And although Christianity took over paganism, heliolatry was omnipresent. Kavakes acknowledged the supreme divinity of the sun. It seems safer to say as sociologists mention, "man is resistant to change".

This is a panoramic view of the Byzantine scholars slightly before and after the fall of Byzantium to the Ottomans. What about Byzantine Artists?

Byzantine artists dwelled mainly for the creation of icons and mosaics. No sculpture or statues of saints are produced as is the case in Catholicism. Icons have been described as "theology written images," which convey spiritual truth in picture form and sometimes described as windows to heaven. They are to give inner hearing and seeing. Orthodox Christians honor and venerate icons which are a representation of God. Meditation and prayers are undertaken before proceeding the painting of an icon. Painting is done according to strict rules. There is a correct way to represent human figures and background, so that the believer responds to them. They are symbolic and the halo around the head denotes the light of Christ shining from within. A blue

garment indicates humanity, red divinity. Yet with time and with icons spreading out of Byzantium and getting the influence of the Renaissance period, styles were improvised.

However, iconoclasm i.e. image breaking referring to a theological debate in the Byzantine church and state changed the setting. The controversy spanned during the years 726-87 and 815-43. In these decades, imperial legislation prevented the production and use of images. Few early Byzantine icons survived those periods. Exceptions were preserved at the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai, Egypt and in the basilicas of Ravenna, Italy. Icons of that period at the Monastery of Sinai, which belong to the period before the iconoclasm, have figures of saints rather with rigid postures and features less expressive than future painted icons and they were not as rich in the choice of colors as those painted later.

The source of debate feared that the viewer misdirect their veneration towards the image rather than the holy person represented in the image. Other possible causes were the rise and effect of Islam belief of no representation of images, the emperor's desire to usurp religious authority and funds, and the Old Testament prohibitions against worshipping images (Exodus 20:4).

In the Middle of the Late Byzantine period, new icon compositions developed. The addition of precious metal revetments, sculpted covers to icons increased in popularity. They could be crafted in different media, including marble, ivory, ceramic, gemstone, precious metal, enamel, textile, fresco and mosaic. They could be "triptychs" that is, have panels on each side to open and close. Rare are the icons painted on both sides. Some icons are known as *acheiropoieta*, not made by human hands. This category was accorded special veneration throughout the history of Byzantium. E.J.Coleman (philosopher and theologian) stated that it is not easy to remain unmoved or detached from the Byzantine image. With improvisation setting in, the colors of the main figures i.e. Christ or the Virgin Mary lightened, and the main features of the faces slightly changed, showing expressions and gestures less rigid. Strict rules became less strict, correct way of representing human figures were *less correct way* and the background brightened. With those innovations, perhaps the catholic believer who asked an orthodox on the reason of the dark faces of saints in icons and who was answered "they darken when they see you" would change his mind.

Despite the artistic distinctions between East and West, Byzantine art has influenced the masters of early Renaissance. Many of the greatest painters commissioned by the Roman Church received their inspiration from Eastern tradition. Duccio's work is clearly recognizable as is Giotto's Stefaneschi Triptych. In fact, many basilicas and churches that once occupied the Roman Empire are adorned with Byzantine influences.

Mosaics is another means of expression. They are made of small pieces of glass, stones, ceramics and other material called tesserae. A careful foundation was prepared before the tesserae was laid. On the moist surface, artists drew images using tools like strings, compasses and calipers to outline geometrical shapes before the tesserae was cemented, creating the final image.

Mosaics produced in the 4th and 5th century were under the influence of the Byzantine Empire. They evolved out of earlier Hellenistic and Roman styles, but the Byzantine Empire made important technical advances and developed mosaic art into personal and religious expression that exerted influence on Islamic art during the Omayyad, Abbasid and Ottoman periods. Byzantine mosaics influenced also artists in the Norman kingdom of Sicily, Venice and was carried by the spread of Orthodoxy in Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania and Russia. In the modern era artists have drawn inspiration from their simplicity, symbolism and beauty.

During the reign of Justinian I, the 6th century, The Basilica Hagia Sophia was decorated with the most incredible figurative mosaics of that time, but these were destroyed during the iconoclasm. Yet, Ravenna's mosaics created in the 5th and 6th centuries are a blend of western and eastern designs, showing the diversity of mosaics art, including religious figures with most often gold background representing heaven and its purpose is to create a spiritual realm and the sense of being in the presence of God without any distraction of detail.

In other parts of the cathedral, the background is a celestial blue sprinkled with stars mostly of consistent size and shape. Besides the religious figures, Empress Theodora and Emperor Justinian I are honored by surrounding saints. Here, faces have less conformity than faces in icons. This might be the effect of an amalgamation of Eastern and Western design. Ravenna is the place where early mosaics are well preserved. The city of Thessaloniki (Greece) is another city where mosaics of the 6th century are preserved. Early Byzantine mosaics were also unearthed in the Middle East, including Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon Syria and Palestine.

Until the disastrous sack of Constantinople 1204 by the 4th crusade, Byzantium was considered by many Western states as the last light of civilization due to the inheritance legacy of Rome and its cultural sophistication. Even states that were at odd with the Byzantine style called on Greek artists to create mosaics. For instance, King Roger II of Sicily called on Greek craftsmen for the mosaics of Cefalù Cathedral. Similarly, the early mosaics of Saint Mark Basilica in Venice were probably created by artists who left Constantinople in the middle 11th century. The same was for the Cathedral of Torcello.

However, some art historians and people of other religions rejected the Greek Byzantine style. Yet, Byzantine artists and their mosaics were influential on the West and the Islamic decorative arts. In the 7th

century artists and craftsmen were mostly trained in Byzantine styles for Islamic decorative elements featuring geometrical forms and stylized plants. Yet the major figure of Christ predominated with its halo around the head, stylized face features, and its golden background, maintaining its heavenly aura.

To conclude, Byzantium scholars influenced the Renaissance period via the Greek language and the core knowledge of classics ancient Greek literature. Yet, many Greek intellectuals integrated themselves into the Western world by adopting Catholicism. Expressing one's belief for Orthodox believers is through icons and mosaics. This art is rather symbolic than realistic. The purpose is to create idealized and sometimes exaggerated features representing the inner soul of the believer.

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