

SEBASTIAN KOLDITZ

Byzantine presence in Italy during the 15th century: some remarks and approaches

Numerous individuals of Byzantine background stayed some time in Italy during the 15th century. The reasons behind the individual cases are manifold, ranging from exile and emigration to educational visits; but diplomatic relations, including the sojourns of the emperors in the West, hold the first place. The aim of my talk was to illustrate various approaches to characterize this late Byzantine presence in Italy, still based on preliminary observations.

The first part was devoted to the quantitative structure of late Byzantine diplomatic relations. With ca. 80 legations (against some 55 to other parts of Europe) there was a clear preponderance of Italian partners in Byzantine foreign relations between 1391 and 1453. While the ratio was still nearly balanced under Manuel II the political horizon shrank dramatically to Italy in the last years (1440-1453). Furthermore we had a closer look at the distribution of missions within the Italian political landscape.

From the prosopographical viewpoint Byzantine envoys outweighed legates from the Latin side, but many ambassadors remain anonymous to us. The main feature of the limited prosopographical tableau is heterogeneity: We encounter Greeks and Latins (in the emperor's service), laymen and clerics, high-ranking courtiers (preferred by Manuel II) and experts at a medium level (under John VIII). The economical elite of late Byzantium is scarcely represented.

In a third part we had a look on transcultural material and immaterial interaction. Byzantine ambassadors were regarded as welcome guests at public ceremonies in Italy. The main item they carried with them was (imperial) prestige. Though without financial resources, late Byzantine emperors were able to re-enact their liberality in the west: distributing relics, conceding privileges or commissioning medals as imperial gifts. Material objects such as manuscripts could serve as carefully chosen diplomatic tools.

Finally we discussed some points regarding the perception of the Byzantine presence in Italy in both Italian and Byzantine sources. In most cases diplomatic missions did not leave narrative traces, but imperial visits found their way into the local historiography. Observers such as Morosini in Venice or Corazza in Florence paid more attention to the Byzantine guests than many humanists did. The perception of Italy in the writings of Byzantine visitors is likewise narrow, e.g. with Syropulos or in Sphrantzes' short account of his visit to Italy in 1466. Nevertheless more systematic attention to the modes of perception is necessary to fully understand the complex interactions between late Byzantium and Italy.