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GEORGE GEMISTOS PLETHO AND HIS LEGACY

The Preamble

It was during the second half of the eleventh century that a mysterious man showed himself in Pisa, Italy. Practically nothing was known about him except his origin: he was a Greek from Dulichium (*Greco da Dulicchio*¹); and Dulichium just meant a “long island” in the Ionian Sea, formerly part of Ulysses’ mythical kingdom². Which one of Ionian Sea’s Seven Islands was Dulichium? Nobody knew. Why and how did that *Greco da Dulicchio* reach Italy? None was able to answer. The point however is that the Greek in question, although wrapped in mystery, speedily proved to be a talented architect³; and architects were scarce in Italy at that time⁴. So he achieved a masterpiece, namely the Duomo (Cathedral) of Pisa⁵. Moreover, since he was able to perform “miracles”, he was given the name Buschet(t)o (most likely from *bos*= bull in Latin), accordingly to the epigram written on his tomb:

*Quod vix mille boum possent iuga iuncta movere,
et quod vix potuit per mare ferre ratis,
Buschetti nisu, quod erat mirabile visu,
Dena puellarum turba levavit onus*⁶.

And another one, on his tomb as well⁷:

*Non habet exemplum niveo de marmore templum
quod fit Busketi prorsus ab ingenio*⁸.

In brief, Buschet(t)o created a school: *la corrente buschetiana*⁹; and this very school was the beginning of the Italian Renaissance, the cornerstone of which was Humanism. And Humanism meant return to the ideals of Classical Antiquity, both Greek and Roman. Thus, late in the fifteenth century, Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) created his first marble work, with an obviously classical subject, namely the “Battle of Lapiths and Centaurs”¹⁰. And the adoration of Antiquity reached a climax, when Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) tried to reconcile Christendom with the Greco-Roman pagan past; for he painted in a church near Rimini, Italy,

¹ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti* (Rome : Newton, 2007 [first edition : Florence, 1550]), p. 107.

² Odyssey, I, 246.

³ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite...*, p.107.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Enzo Carli and Gian Alberto dell’Acqua, *Storia dell’ arte*, vol. I (Bergamo: Istituto d’arti grafiche, 1967), p. 278.

⁶ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite...*, p. 107. (“What a thousand oxen under the yoke can hardly move/and what hardly could a ship carry by the sea/thanks to Buskettus’ ardour –what a fine scene!/a troop of girls, in petty groups of ten, was able to lift”. [Free translation.])

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “There is no longer another example of a building made of white marble, since we have the masterly temple created thanks wholly to Busketus’ genius”. (Free translation.)

⁹ E. Carli and G. A. dell’Acqua, *Storia dell’ arte*, vol. I, p. 281.

¹⁰ J. R. Hale (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Italian Renaissance* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), entry “Michelangelo, Buonarroti”, p. 211.

Homer and Virgil praising Jesus Christ¹¹. It is important, therefore, to see the spring of that powerful artistic and philosophical current that shaped Modern and Contemporary Europe.

I.

Contra... defensionem Aristotelis¹²

The key person in the movement for the revival of the Greek and Latin classical wisdom, culture and values was George Gemistos surnamed Pletho. He was born in 1355 most likely in Constantinople and was educated chiefly in Adrianople (Edirne), in the court of Sultan Murad I. It was then and there that he was 'initiated' into Judaism and Zoroastrianism mainly by Eliseus, a Jewish scholar, who was his beloved teacher¹³. Afterwards (most likely in 1407) he left the Ottoman capital and visited Cyprus and Palestine¹⁴; at last he settled at last in Constantinople, where he excelled as a teacher. Still, his neo-Platonic views clashed with the Aristotelian current ruling by that time in the Byzantine Empire¹⁵. He was, therefore, accused of heresy and accordingly exiled by Emperor Manuel II to Mistras, capital of the Morea Despotate, that is of the byzantine autonomous principality of the Peloponnese¹⁶.

In Mistras, Gemistos was given the dignity of *Prostatēs tōn Nomōn* (:Protector of the Laws), i.e. the one of the Chief Justice¹⁷. Further, and thanks to the freedom that he enjoyed in the court of the Despot Theodore II and his wife, the Italian Cleopa Malatesta, he managed to form an "Academy" moulded on the one wherein the ancient Plato used to teach¹⁸. The names *Phratria* and "School of Athens" were given by him to the new Academy, although it was to be found not in Attica but in Laconia¹⁹.

Be that as it may, in 1415 it was the Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus (1391-1425) that reached the Peloponnese. In theory, he was accompanying the new Despot of the Morea, namely Theodore II (1407/1425-1443), his second-born son²⁰; in practice, nonetheless, he was doing inspection. For the Peloponnese was now the unique part of the Empire that could not be regarded as moribund. The other remains of the once glorious Roman Empire of the East (Constantinople included) were all but miserable, and still existing thanks to the "good will" of the Ottoman Sultans. Thus, the Emperor Manuel II wished to oversee his last dominion and eventually organise its defence²¹.

¹¹ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite...*, p. 1373.

¹² "Against the defence of Aristotle".

¹³ A. A. Papadopoulos, entry "Gemistos, Geōrgios", *Megalē Hellēnikē Enkyklopaideia* (= The Great Greek Encyclopaedia), vol. VIII (Athens: Pyrsos, 1929), p. 177.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Silvia Ronchey, *L'enigma di Piero. L'ultimo bizantino e la crociata fantasma nella rivelazione di un grande quadro* (Milan : BUR Rizzoli, 2010³), p. 25.

¹⁶ Judith Herrin, *Byzantium. The surprising life of a medieval Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 293.

¹⁷ Kōnstantinos Paparrēgopoulos, *Historia tou Hellēnikou Ethnous* (= History of the Greek Nation), vol. XIII (Athens: Galaxias, 1971 [first edition: 1860-1874]), p. 330.

¹⁸ Silvia Ronchey, *L'enigma di Piero...*, pp. 36-38, 49-50, 65-67, 93-94.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

²⁰ K. Paparrēgopoulos, *Historia tou Hellēnikou Ethnous*, vol. XIII, p. 329.

²¹ Ibid.

Paradoxical as it may appear and though that Sovereign was the one that had exiled Gemistos from Constantinople, he was a famous scholar as well²². The assumption, therefore, that he banished Gemistos from the capital of the Empire not because of his personal beliefs but following instructions of the Orthodox Church is more than plausible. For the luminaries of the Constantinopolitan Church were then embarking on an –irresolute– effort to base the Christian Faith on Aristotelian theories²³, as the Roman Papacy had already done (thanks mainly to Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas)²⁴. Thus, when Manuel II reached the Morea, he felt himself relieved of capital’s suffocating atmosphere and therefore free to express his latent sympathy for Gemistos²⁵; and the latter got the opportunity to set out his views concerning the political affairs of the Empire in two speeches he delivered²⁶, one addressed to the Sovereign²⁷ and the second to his son, i.e. the new Despot of the Morea Theodore II²⁸.

The situation of the Byzantine Empire was a critical one. In 1261, the rule of the Christian Orthodox Emperors was restored in Constantinople: the Frankish Empire established thanks to the Fourth Crusade existed no longer. Yet the regenerated Empire had now a fresh enemy to confront, namely the Ottoman Turks. What, therefore, must to be done?

The answer to such a crucial question crystallised an old dichotomy within the ruling social strata of the Byzantine society. The *basileis et autocratores Romanorum*, i.e. the monarchs of the Eastern Roman Empire, had tacitly recognised from the tenth century onwards the loss of Western Europe to the advantage chiefly of the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire²⁹. In other words, the *basileis* of the Macedonian Dynasty (867-1056) had agreed to “the partition of the Christendom between themselves and the Franks”³⁰. The Byzantine Empire continued being ecumenical; still, its ecumenicity was now a limited one³¹, because only Central and Eastern Europe were considered to be its spiritual, intellectual and political Lebensraum³². In point of fact, as early as the ninth century in the eyes of influential Western intellectuals the Byzantine Emperors are not *Romanorum* but only *Graecorum imperatores*³³; and as aforementioned the Constantinopolitan

²² Judith Herrin, *Byzantium...*, p. 282; Anastasios Gordios (1654/5-1729), *Sur Mahomet et contre les Latins*. Édition critique accompagnée d’une introduction et de notes par Astérios Argyriou (Athens : Association scientifique d’études sur la Grèce centrale, 1983), p. 20 (note 1).

²³ See mainly *Georgii Gemisti Plethonis, Contra Scholarii defensionem Aristotelis* published in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 160, 979d-1020b. And also Dēmētrios Dedes, “Religion und Politik bei Georgios Gemistos Plethon”, *Philosophia*. Yearbook of the Research Center for Greek Philosophy at the Academy of Athens, Nos 5-6 (1975-1976), p. 428; cf. Demetrius Chrysoloras, *Logos kata Latinōn* (= Speech against the Roman Catholics). Edited by Dr. Dēmētrios G. Koutsoukēs (Athens: Trochalia, 1998), p. 21.

²⁴ Étienne Gilson, *La philosophie au Moyen Âge*, vol. II (Paris : Payot, 1922), pp. 3-35.

²⁵ Theodoros Nikolaou, *Hai peri Politeias kai Dikaiou ideai tou G. Plēthōnos Gemistou* (= The ideas of G. Pletho Gemistos concerning the Statehood and the Law) Salonika : Center for Byzantine Studies of the University of Thessaloniki, 1974), p. 82 (note 2).

²⁶ K. Paparrēgopoulos, *Historia tou Hellēnikou Ethnous*, vol. XIII, p. 330.

²⁷ *Ad regem Emmanuelem de rebus Peloponnesiacis oratio I* published in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 160, 821a-840c.

²⁸ *Ad principem Theodorum de rebus Peloponnesiacis oratio II*, in in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 160, 841a-865a.

²⁹ Telēmachos Loungēs, *Hē ideologia tēs Vyzantinēs Autokratōrias* (= The Ideology of the Byzantine Empire), Athens: Hērodotos, 1993, p. 39.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 102.

³² Ibid., p. 75.

³³ Ibid., pp. 93-94.

Patriarchate, backed by the Byzantine aristocracy, whose Senate was the institutional/political instrument par excellence, never recognised such a “surrender”³⁴.

It is noteworthy that the political influence of the Senate increased during the last centuries prior to the Empire’s death³⁵. The *archontes* (:archons), i. e. the high officials, both ecclesiastical and laic, constituted now the really ruling body in the Empire’s framework. Therefore, they had a decisive role as far as the election of the last Emperor, namely Constantine XI Palaeologus, was concerned³⁶. It is well known, moreover, that they were the bitter enemies of the Union of the Orthodox Church with the Roman Catholic one, whilst the *basileis* of the Palaeologi Dynasty were Union’s ardent supporters. In short, the monarchs’ slogan was: *Salus Christianismi suprema lex esto*; still, the aristocracy and the higher-ups of the clergy used to retort (in Greek): *Salus fidei orthodoxae suprema lex esto*. And to this bitter dispute, Gemistos’ contribution was essential. For he vociferated the old Roman rallying cry: *Salus patriae maioris suprema lex esto!*³⁷

II.

...Quasi Platonem alterum³⁸

As aforesaid, Gemistos exposed his ideas and views in the speeches addressed to the Emperor and the Despot of the Morea, the latter’s son; and his program consisted of the following points³⁹:

- I. Since the salvation of the Fatherland constituted the “Supreme Law”, it was necessary that the official religion should be changed. In other words the Christian religion must be abandoned and the Ancient Greek paganism adopted instead⁴⁰. The embrace of Dodekathēon’s religion, moreover, would imply the revival of the concept of *heimarmene*, that is of “fate”, “destiny”, which was crucial in Moslems’ belief ([Turkish:] *kismet*< [Arabic:] *qismet*), and made them able to gain victories over the Christians⁴¹.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

³⁵ Aikaterinē Christophilopoulou, *Eklogē, anagoreusis kai stepsis tou vyzantinou autokratoros* (= Election, nomination and coronation of the byzantine Emperor), Dissertation of the Academy of Athens No. 42 (1956), pp. 195, 205.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 205.

³⁷ Spyridōn Lampros, *Palaiologeia kai Peloponnēsiaka* (= [Documents concerning] the Palaeologi House and the Peloponnese), vol. 4 (Athens: Epitropē Ekdoseōs kataloipōn tou Spyridōnos Lamprou [Committee for the publication of Spyridōn Lampros’ works, 1926), p. 130.

³⁸ «Almost another Plato”.

³⁹ A.A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire*. Translated into Greek by Dēmōsthenēs Savramēs (Athens: Bergadēs, 1955), pp. 794-796; D. Dedes, “Religion und Politik bei Georgios Gemistos Plethon”, p. 424ff.; Silvia Ronchey, *L’enigma di Piero...*, pp. 25-26.

⁴⁰ On this very matter see his short treatise *Zoroastrea*, published in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 160, 973b-974d.

⁴¹ On the concept of *heimarmene* according to Pletho see mainly: Georgii Gemisti Plethonis, *Ex libro de legibus*, in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 160, 961a-963d.

- II. Such an important change would bring about the evolution of the Byzantine Empire to a national statehood, with the Peloponnese, “traditional land of the Hellenes”, as its core.
- III. The system of government of the new, national State should be the monarchical one, patterned on the Platonic idea concerning the “ruling philosophers”⁴².
- IV. The Armed Forces of his ideal statehood should be “national”, i.e. consisting of autochthonous people and never of mercenaries.
- V. The population of the regenerated Byzantine Empire (practically of the Peloponnese) should be divided into three social classes, namely the “growers”, the “custodians” (: military) and the “archons” (: rulers). The first ones, also named *helots*, would cultivate the land and pay the taxes; the military would defend the country and the rulers would govern it “philosophically”. The supreme archon would be the ideal monarch along the Platonic lines.
- VI. The systems of agriculture and production should be modernised. Accordingly, the curriculum of education should include not only Letters but Technology, too.
- VII. Currency should not exist; all taxes and exchanges would be in kind.

* * *

As aforementioned, George Gemistos was a favourite with the Palaeologi Imperial House. For the members of that Dynasty shared to some degree his strong distrust of the Orthodox Church. Needless to say that his program of radical reforms was never put into effect in the Byzantine Peloponnese. Still, when the Emperor John VIII (1425-1448), successor to Manuel II, paid an official visit to the Peloponnese in 1427-1428, asked Gemistos about the Union of the Churches that the *basileus* was aspiring to accomplish⁴³.

The answer of Gemistos was ambiguous; for he regarded the voyage to Italy the Emperor was planning as venturesome. If, nonetheless, John VIII was determined to go, he should be careful of Roman Catholics’ intrigues⁴⁴. In other words, Gemistos’ mistrust of the Byzantine Church did not imply acceptance of the Roman Papacy⁴⁵: he rejected Christianity as a whole⁴⁶.

Be that as it may, when John VIII entered Ferrara, Italy, on March 4, 1438⁴⁷, Gemistos, though a laic, was with him. It was then that, a couple of days later, the works of the Ferrara-Florence Council (an Ecumenical one according to the Roman

⁴² Plato, *Republic*, 473c-d; cf. *Phaedo*, 266c.

⁴³ K. Paparrēgopoulos, *Historia tou Hellēnikou Ethnous*, vol. XIII, p. 336.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 336-337.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

⁴⁶ Th. Nikolaou, *Hai peri Politeias kai Dikaiou ideai tou G. Plēthōnos Gemistou*, p. 91 (note 5).

⁴⁷ Charles Diehl, *Figures byzantines* (Paris : Armand Colin, 1909), pp. 278-282.

Catholic Church) began⁴⁸. In the meantime, Cleopa Malatesta, the wife of Theodore II, Despot of the Morea, had passed away. Her death was a mystery; and, if truth be told, had been most likely a murder⁴⁹. For an Italian consort of a Despot of the Byzantine Peloponnese was considered to be hazardous by those who were contrary to the union of the Orthodox Church with the Papacy. Cleopa, moreover, was a fervent disciple of Gemistos⁵⁰; thus, she was suspected of crypto-paganism. That is why Gemistos was now without his protectress. Still, he kept up his courage and managed to get, in Italy, a brilliant opportunity to propagate his ideas.

As a matter of fact, whilst the Emperor and his retinue were fighting in order to avoid, if the Union of the Churches were realised, the Orthodox Church's subjecting to indignities, George Gemistos used to give lectures on Plato and the Platonism⁵¹. Cosimo de' Medici, surnamed *Cosimo il Vecchio* (1389-1464) was favourably impressed by him, and Gemistos, in order to reciprocate⁵², wrote and published his short treatise *Peri hōn Aristotelēs pros Platōna diapheretai* (= "On the differences between the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy")⁵³; it is in this very writing that he accused Aristotle of atheism⁵⁴. Full of enthusiasm, therefore, Cosimo financed the Latin translation of Plato's works by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499)⁵⁵, his physician's son who was a talented scholar⁵⁶. The latter called promptly Gemistos "almost a second Plato" (*quasi Platonem alterum*)⁵⁷; further, he was going to crown his immense endeavour of Plato's translation by the writing and publishing, in the second half of the fifteenth century, his book *Theologia platonica de immortalitate animae* (= Platonic theology concerning the immortality of the soul)⁵⁸.

Italian magnates, in short, used to listen to Gemistos spellbound; and the Greek neo-Platonic and crypto-pagan philosopher regarded the time opportune to change his name from Gemistos to Pletho⁵⁹. In medieval Greek *gemistos* means overfilled; and *plēthōn* (> Pletho) has the same meaning in classical Greek⁶⁰. Nonetheless, Plethon has acoustic similarity with the name Plato (Platōn in Greek), Gemistos' spiritual hero. That is why the assumption that Gemistos/Pletho came to believe that he was Plato's reincarnation is plausible⁶¹.

Early in July, 1439, the Decree of the union between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church was signed in Florence⁶²; nonetheless, it was greeted with despise in Constantinople⁶³. For both the higher-ups and the populace considered

⁴⁸ Georges Ostrogorsky, *Histoire de l'Empire byzantin*. Translated into French by J. Gouillard (Paris : Payot, 1969), p. 584.

⁴⁹ Silvia Ronchey, *L'enigma di Piero...*, p. 94.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁵¹ K. Paparrēgopoulos, *Historia tou Hellēnikou Ethnous*, vol. XIII, p. 338.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Georgii Gemisti Plethonis, *De Platonicae et Aristotelicae philosophiae differentia*, published in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 160, 889a-931b; and also Giorgio Gemisto Pletone, *Delle differenze fra Platone e Aristotele*. A cura di Moreno Neri, Rimini: Raffaelli, 2001. Cf. J. R. Hale (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Italian Renaissance*, entry "Gemistus Pletho", p. 150.

⁵⁴ J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 160, 889c.

⁵⁵ J. R. Hale (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Italian Renaissance*, entry "Ficino, Marsilio", p. 134.

⁵⁶ Roy Doliner and Benjamin Blech, *I segreti della Sistina. Il messaggio proibito di Michelangelo* (Rome: BUR Rizzoli, 2013²), p. 90.

⁵⁷ Silvia Ronchey, *L'enigma di Piero...*, p. 25.

⁵⁸ J. R. Hale (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Italian Renaissance*, entry "Ficino, Marsilio", p. 134.

⁵⁹ K. Paparrēgopoulos, *Historia tou Hellēnikou Ethnous*, vol. XIII, p. 338.

⁶⁰ Silvia Ronchey, *L'enigma di Piero...*, p. 25.

⁶¹ K. Paparrēgopoulos, *Historia tou Hellēnikou Ethnous*, vol. XIII, p. 338.

⁶² G. Ostrogorsky, *Histoire de l'Empire byzantin*, p. 584.

⁶³ K. Paparrēgopoulos, *Historia tou Hellēnikou Ethnous*, vol. XIII, pp. 371-372.

the Roman Catholics to be the irreconcilable foes of the “Greek Orthodox and their country”⁶⁴. They would rather, therefore, “see the Turkish Sultan ruling Constantinople and not the Roman Pope”⁶⁵.

Whatever the facts of the matter, Gemistos Pletho reached Mistras, still capital of the Byzantine Peloponnese, where he was going to spend the rest of his life. He passed away in 1452⁶⁶, i.e. almost a year prior to Constantinople’s capture by the Ottomans. He was lucky enough, because he did not see the end of his “Greek Fatherland”. Further, he had time to complete his *opus majus*, entitled *Nomoi* (= Book of Laws)⁶⁷.

Still, this “Book of Laws” had been less lucky than its author was...

III. The Legacy

Gemistos’ *opus majus* was discovered following his death; and Theodora, the consort of Demetrius, Despot of the Morea, sent it to Gennadius II, Patriarch of Constantinople, asking what to do with it. Such a question was crucial; for Gemistos’ “Book of Laws” was rightly regarded as the “most anti-Christian of his writings”. Meantime, the political situation in the Greek lands had been radically changed. The Ottomans, under the young Sultan Mehmet II, had conquered Constantinople on the 29th of May, 1453; still, the new ruler was fond of the Greek Orthodox clergy⁶⁸, so hostile to the Roman as to allegedly help him in taking the *Basileuoussa Polis* (= Imperial City)⁶⁹. A Greek clergyman and notorious scholar, George Scholarius, who had a name for his bitter enmity against the Roman Catholics⁷⁰, was now the fresh Patriarch of the “New Rome”, i.e. Constantinople, under the name of Gennadius II⁷¹. In spite of his hatred for the “Franks”, he was an admirer of Aristotle⁷²; and further a friend of Sultan Mehmet II the Conqueror. As a matter of fact, he used to have with the Ottoman Sovereign long discussions on theological matters⁷³ – and the latter remained delighted⁷⁴. Well, it was to him, the Patriarch-friend-of-the-Sultan, that Gemistos’ “Book of Laws” was sent; and

⁶⁴ Charles Diehl, *Histoire de l'Empire byzantin* (Paris : Auguste Picard, 1919), p. 199.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ J. R. Hale (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Italian Renaissance*, entry “Gemistus Pletho”, p. 150.

⁶⁷ K. Paparrêgopoulos, *Historia tou Hellênikou Ethnous*, vol. XIII, p. 338.

⁶⁸ See N. Iorga, *Byzance après Byzance* (Bucharest: Association internationale d'études du sud-est européen. Comité national roumain, 1971), pp. 11, 85-86.

⁶⁹ Louis Bréhier, *Vie et mort de Byzance* (Paris : Albin Michel, 1968), p. 407.

⁷⁰ See mainly *Gennadii CP Patriarchae, De processione Spiritus Sancti* published in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 160, 667a-714a; cf. Louis Bréhier, *Vie et mort de Byzance*, pp. 404, 405, 417.

⁷¹ N. Iorga, *Byzance après Byzance*, pp. 85-86.

⁷² See his letter to Mark of Ephesus: *Gennadii Scholarii, Epistola ad Marcum Ephesinum. (Librum suum mittit quem pro Aristotele scripserat)* published in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 160, 743a-746c.

⁷³ *Gennadii Scholarii, De via salutis humanae* published in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 160, 319a-332c.

⁷⁴ *Excerptum ex Patriarchica CPoleos Historia* published in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 160, 312c, 316b and chiefly 317a-b.

Gennadius was categorical: it must be burnt⁷⁵. For it was “full of [spiritual] calamities”⁷⁶...

And so was done. And it was not earlier than the nineteenth century that the remnants of Gemistos’ opus majus were published in France⁷⁷, and reprinted during the twentieth in Holland⁷⁸. Yet quite different was the fate of Pletho’s legacy in the West.

* * *

One of Pletho’s famous disciples was Bessarion (1403[?]-1472)⁷⁹. He was born in Trebizond, on the seashore of the Black Sea, but he was educated chiefly in Constantinople and Mistras, where “he sat at Pletho’s knees”⁸⁰. He reached Italy in 1438 as a member of member of Byzantine Emperor’s suite; and he proved to be the most ardent supporter of the union of the Churches. He was named, therefore, cardinal in 1439 and he never again reached the Greek lands. For he spent his life in Italy, serving the Papacy in several diplomatic and administrative charges⁸¹. Still, his main task, the very aim of his life had been the propagation of Gemistos’ Neoplatonism in the Western Europe. He assumed himself to translate Plato’s works from Greek into Latin, and further he proved to be a great collector of Greek manuscripts. It is well-known, in fact, that he bequeathed his collection to the Republic of Venice in 1468; and his gift became the nucleus of the Library of St. Mark (*Biblioteca Marciana*)⁸².

Prior to his becoming cardinal, nevertheless, as soon as he disembarked in Italy in order to take part in the Council of Ferrara-Florence, he had with some Greek manuscripts – among others Strabo’s *Geographica* and Euclid’s *Elements*⁸³. Doing so, the future cardinal inaugurated a new era; for it was thanks to him that Strabo was “rediscovered” in the Western Europe. Strabo was certain that the earth is spherical⁸⁴ and that it is possible to reach India sailing from the Iberian Peninsula westwards⁸⁵.

The knowledge and teachings of Strabo and Euclid influenced Paolo del Pozzo Toscanelli (1397-1482), the Florentine astronomer, geographer, and mathematician⁸⁶, to whom Christopher Columbus “owed [so] much”⁸⁷. For without Toscanelli’s advices and scientific assistance America would never be discovered

⁷⁵ Gennadii Patriarchae, Epistola ad Josephum Exarchum, published in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 160, 633a-648c.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 636d.

⁷⁷ Charles Alexandre (ed.), *Gémiste Pléthon. Traité des lois*, Paris, 1858.

⁷⁸ Gemistus Plethon, *Nomôn syngraphês ta sôzomena*, Amsterdam : A. M. Hakkart, 1966.

⁷⁹ Silvia Ronchey, *L'enigma di Piero...*, pp. 23-27.

⁸⁰ David Talbot Rice, *Art of the Byzantine Era* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963), p. 254.

⁸¹ J. R. Hale (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Italian Renaissance*, entry “Bessarion, Cardinal”, pp. 50-51.

⁸² Ibid., p. 51.

⁸³ Silvia Ronchey, *L'enigma di Piero*, p. 55.

⁸⁴ Strabo, *Geographica*, C11.

⁸⁵ Strabo, *Geographica*, C 64-65.

⁸⁶ J. R. Hale (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Italian Renaissance*, entry “Toscanelli, Paolo del Pozzo”, p. 317.

⁸⁷ Ibid., entry “Columbus”, p. 93.

by Columbus⁸⁸. Toscanelli's disciples were Leonardo da Vinci⁸⁹ and Filippo Brunelleschi⁹⁰, the architect that achieved the return to the models of the Classical Antiquity⁹¹ (and whose forerunner had been *Buschetto da Dulicchio*). Both of them, namely Leonardo da Vinci and Brunelleschi, were greatly in debt to Toscanelli for everything they were taught about Geometry. Member of that "Florentine circle"⁹², moreover, was Amerigo Vespucci⁹³, who demonstrated that the "land" discovered by Columbus was not India but an entire continent⁹⁴, as the ancient thinkers Plato and Plutarch had asserted centuries before the Christian era⁹⁵.

Marsilio Ficino moreover, Plato's translator, founded in Florence a "Platonic Academy", patterned upon the one in Mistras, and properly called "Scuola di Atene"⁹⁶. Of course, that was achieved thanks to the financial grant of Cosimo de' Medici (*Cosimo il Vecchio*), who aspired to make of himself a "second Solon" and of Florence "another Athens" of the Golden Age⁹⁷. Cosimo de' Medici and Ficino were speedily copied throughout Italy and Platonist Academies were established in Rimini, Urbino, Naples and even Rome⁹⁸ - the "Papal Rome"!

It is noteworthy that Michelangelo Buonarroti, who 'revolutionised' the Italian and, generally speaking, European Art, was a protégé of the Medici House and a Ficino's disciple⁹⁹; another Master of him was count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, a Platonist, too¹⁰⁰. That is why Neo-platonic filiation of Michelangelo is beyond any doubt¹⁰¹, although he had never been fluent in classical Greek and Latin¹⁰².

Nonetheless, there is something more: even through *Il Principe* of Niccolò Machiavelli, alleged Leonardo da Vinci's friend¹⁰³, one can see Pletho's Neo-Platonism. Machiavelli's advocacy of the national statehood under a strong but cultured leader, his antipathy against the mercenaries, his abhorrence of atheism, and -last but not least- his knowledge of Islam (all armed prophets have been victorious, but the unarmed ones destroyed) have roots in Pletho's writings¹⁰⁴...

⁸⁸ Dimitri Mereskovskij, *Leonardo da Vinci. La vita del più grande genio di tutti i tempi*. Translated into Italian by Mario Visetti (Florence : Giunti, 2009), p. 148.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite...*, p. 329.

⁹¹ Enzo Carli and Gian Alberto dell'Acqua, *Storia dell'Arte*, vol. II (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1966), p. 164.

⁹² J. R. Hale (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Italian Renaissance*, entry "Toscanelli, Paolo del Pozzo", p. 93.

⁹³ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite...*, p. 561.

⁹⁴ Jakob Wassermann, *Christoph Columbus, der Don Quichote des Ozeans*. Translated into Greek by Giannēs Lampsas (Athens: Hoi philoi tou vivliou [= The Friends of the Book], 1945), p. 203; cf. J. R. Hale, *Encyclopaedia of the Italian Renaissance*, entry « Vespucci, Amerigo », p. 334.

⁹⁵ Plato, *Timaeus*, 24e-25a; Plutarch, *On the Face in the Moon*, 941b-c.

⁹⁶ R. Doliner and B. Blech, *I segreti della Sistina...*, pp. 90-91.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Silvia Ronchey, *L'enigma di Piero...*, p. 166.

⁹⁹ Enzo Carli and Gian Alberto dell'Acqua, *Storia dell'Arte*, vol. III (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1969), p. 65; R. Doliner and B. Blech, *I segreti della Sistina...*, p. 90.

¹⁰⁰ R. Doliner and B. Blech, *I segreti della Sistina...*, pp. 90, 96.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 91-92.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁰³ D. Mereskovskij, *Leonardo da Vinci...*, p. 180ff.

¹⁰⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe*. Translated into Greek by Nikos Kazantzakēs (Athens: Galaxias, 1963), passim; cf. Th. Nikolaou, *Hai peri Politeias kai Dikaiou ideai tou G. Plēthōnos Gemistou*, pp. 43, 55, 88, 99, 111.

As an Epilogue: The Great Question

On May 30, 1460 Mistras fell to the Ottomans¹⁰⁵; the history of the Byzantine/Greek Morea was over. Still, in 1464 Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, cousin of Cleopa Malatesta, the consort of Morea Despot Theodore II, embarked on a Crusade against the Turkish Morea. He lacked the effective assistance of Christian Powers – mainly of Venetian Republic; as a result he did not succeed in capturing the Mistras fortress¹⁰⁶. He managed, nonetheless, to conquer the mortal remains of Pletho and translate them to Rimini, Italy, where the tomb of “Mistras’ Philosopher” still exists¹⁰⁷. Along with Pletho’s corpse, thanks to Malatesta, came to Italy even the surviving relatives of G. Gemistos Pletho¹⁰⁸; and that very “arrival” may be regarded as the demonstration of Italian humanists’ veneration for Gemistos’ personality. As a matter of fact, Malatesta aspired to liberate the Peloponnese mainly because that land was the one where Gemistos Pletho lived and worked. Thus the following question arises: May such a respect, veneration, nay! affection be justified only by Gemistos Pletho’s philosophical erudition? Or is it possible to explain it by knowledge of another kind, namely technological, that the “Mistras Philosopher” devised to his Italian followers?

The burst of scientific innovation in Italy and, generally speaking, Renaissance (Western) Europe constitute the probative value of the second reply. Pletho, in fact, had mastery of Ancient scientific knowledge¹⁰⁹ and preferred to bequeath this knowledge not in the moribund Byzantium but in Italy. That is why the thesis promoted in the twentieth century, according to which Gemistos Pletho founded a “secret society” that still exists is plausible¹¹⁰.

Is this “secret society” still weighing with our world’s affairs?

The solution, nevertheless, of such a critical problem is obviously beyond the scope of this short article.

¹⁰⁵ Louis Bréhier, *Vie et mort de Byzance*, p. 429.

¹⁰⁶ Silvia Ronchey, *L’enigma di Piero...*, pp. 334-336.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ By way of example: Plato, *Phaedo*, 110b-110e.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-169.