

Bessarion: A Biographical Profile

Bessarion (ca. 1403-8) was born in Trebizond,⁶⁴ perhaps of humble parents,⁶⁵ but considerable debate still surrounds his date of birth and baptismal name.⁶⁶ At a young age

⁶⁴On Trebizond, see William Miller, *Trebizond, the last Greek Empire* (London, 1926). It became an independent kingdom after the Latin Conquest of Constantinople in 1204 ruled by descendants of the Comneni. Numerous marriages occurred between daughters of the ruling house and members of the imperial family in Constantinople.

⁶⁵Apostolis, *PG* 161, cxxxii.

⁶⁶Monfasani, "Bessarion's Latin Eulogists," (1986), 114-24, who establishes the date of birth as 1408, provides an overview of earlier speculation. Most scholars have previously opted for January 2, 1403, the date first proposed by Vast, *Cardinal Bessarion*, 2, although his evidence has never been entirely accepted, since it consists of a note preceding an edition of Capranica's funeral oration in B. Malvasia, *Compendio historic della basilica dei sant XII Apostoli* (Rome, 1665) which could be the scribe's interpolation. See the discussion of Monfasani for the unreliability of Capranica (as discussed above, 11-12) and the more reliable testimony of Perotti, Ambrogio Travesari and Ransano, which support Bessarion's references to his youth in his prologue to Marc. gr. 533 (discussed above, 8 and n.24) and his *Encyclica ad Graecos*, *PG* 161, 486D-487A. Gianfrancesco Lusini, "Recenti Studi sul Concilio di Firenze e il Cardinale Bessarione," *Studi Storici* 2 (1996) : 684, accepts Monfasani's dating, which also seems the most probable to the present writer.

Bessarion's baptismal name is often cited as "John", based upon an inaccurate reading of one of Bessarion's marginal notes in a manuscript of Plutarch, by A. Bandini, *De vita et rebus gestis Bessarionis* (1777). Loenertz, "Biographie du Bessarion", 123, has examined the manuscript and explained the error. He also cites a letter from George Amiroutzes to Bessarion, where the latter's baptismal name is stated as "Basil." (*PG* 161, 726 C). This would seem the more logical choice. As Loenertz remarks, in the Eastern monastic tradition, the monk's name began with the first initial of his own baptismal name. For concurrence with Loenertz' findings, see Mioni, "Bessarione scriba." See also Lotte Labowsky, "Bessarione, Giovanni Basilio." *DBI* 9 (Rome, 1967), 696-8; C. Bianca, "Una nuova testimonianza sul nome di battesimo del Bessarione." *RSCI* 38 (1984) : 428-36. Examples of this monastic practice abound for this period. Manuel Eugenicus became the monk, Mark; George Scholarius, Gennadius; John Chortasmenus, Ignatius; George Phrantzes, Gregory. One might also wonder why an individual with such cultured tastes as Bessarion would choose for his namesake an ascetic anchorite known for his scorn of learning, if he could have chosen "Basil", the name of one of the most revered and cultured Fathers of the Church.

he enjoyed the patronage of Dositheus, sometime Metropolitan of Trebizond,⁶⁷ who sponsored the promising youth's education at the schools of John Chortasmenus and George Chrysokokkes for the study of rhetoric, mathematics and Aristotelian philosophy.⁶⁸ Bessarion entered the monastic order in 1424, was ordained deacon in 1425 and priest in 1430.⁶⁹ He was also active within court circles at Constantinople, accompanying an imperial delegation to the Court at Trebizond (ca. 1424-7),⁷⁰ where he delivered an address to the Emperor Alexius IV.⁷¹

⁶⁷On Dositheus see Storman, "Bessarion before Council," 129-30, 142-3; V. Laurent, "La succession épiscopale de Trébizonde," *Archeion Pontou* 21 (1956): 92-4; Archbishop Chrysanthos, "Η Ἐκκλησία Τραπεζούντος," *Archeion Pontou* 4-5 (1933), 259 ff.

⁶⁸Apostolis, *PG*, 161, cxxxiii; Platina, *PG*, 161, cv; Capranica, Mohler, 3, 406, for Bessarion's progressive education under the Bishop of Selymbria (Chortasmenus) and Chrysokokkes. For identification of Chortasmenus see H. Hunger, *Johannes Chortasmenos (ca. 1370-ca. 1436/37): Briefe, Gedichte und Kleine Schriften* (Vienna, 1969). See also discussion of Loenertz, "Biographie du Bessarion," 127-30; Storman, "Bessarion before Council," 129-30; Nicol, *Church and society*, 117-20; Wilson, *Scholars of Byzantium*, 271. On Chrysokokkes see Wilson, *Scholars of Byzantium*, 271-1. On Dositheus' patronage see Storman, "Bessarion before Council," 129 and ns. 8-9; Monfasani, "Bessarion's Latin Eulogists," 120; Laurent, *DHGE*, 14, 700-1; Labowsky, *DBI*, 696-8.

⁶⁹Bessarion himself documents and dates his ecclesiastical advancements in a *Horologian* in Cod. Marc. gr. 14, reproduced by Saffrey, "Recherches Cardinal Bessarion," 270-1. Saffrey, 273, indicates that, in order to conform to Byzantine canon law which required candidates for ordination as deacon and priest to be 25 and 30 years of age respectively, Bessarion would have been born in 1400. Storman, "Bessarion before Council," 148, n. 7, suggests that powerful (imperial?) pressure could have been exerted to procure dispensations in Bessarion's case, an explanation supported by Monfasani, "Bessarion's Latin Eulogists," 114-24.

⁷⁰Several missions (c. 1425-27) visited Trebizond to conclude a marriage between the Emperor John VIII and Maria, daughter of Alexius IV, Emperor of Trebizond.

⁷¹Item No. 3 in Cod. Marc. gr. 533, ed. Archbishop Chrysanthos, *Archeion Pontou* 12 (1946): 117-30. Scholars who prefer 1403 for Bessarion's date of birth consider that he made mention of this mission when, as the newly appointed Latin Patriarch of

In 1431 Bessarion followed Dositheus, who had been appointed Metropolitan of Monembasia,⁷² to the Peloponnese.⁷³ At Mistra the young monk studied astronomy, mathematics and Platonic philosophy under the famed philosopher, George Gemistus Plethon.⁷⁴ From March-June 1436, he corresponded with Theodore II, Despot of the Peloponnese.⁷⁵

Early in 1436, the Emperor John VIII recalled Bessarion from Mistra to Constantinople where he assumed a teaching position at the important Monastery of St. Basil and he might also have been appointed abbot by the Emperor.⁷⁶ In 1436 he also formed part

Constantinople in 1463, in his *Encyclica ad Graecos*, PG 161, 461D, he stated: "For my name was known to all who knew the Greek language. I was not born twenty-four years when I was exalted in honour and dignity beyond my age by the princes of our nation, by all of you, and by the very emperors themselves. For not by my ability but because of their goodness they preferred me not only to my peers but also to older men who enjoyed power and favour." See Storman, "Bessarion before Council," 133; Loenertz, "Biographie du Bessarion," 131-2. But see now, Monfasani, "Bessarion's Latin Eulogists," 120-2, who discounts this identification since Bessarion did not associate with "the princes of our nation" until his later sojourn in the Peloponnese. I use Monfasani's translation.

⁷²For Dositheus in Monembasia, see Laurent, "Succession épiscopale de Trébizonde," 93, and idem, *DHGE* 14, 700-1. See also Storman, "Bessarion Before Council," 130.

⁷³The standard work on the Peloponnese continues to be Denis A. Zakythinos, *Le Despotat grec de Morée*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1932; rev. ed. London: Variorum, 1975).

⁷⁴On Mistra see Zakythinos, vol. 2, *Vie et institutions* 321-37; Steven Runciman, *Mistra, Byzantine Capital of the Peloponnese* (London, 1980). On Plethon see F. Masai, *Pléthon et le platonisme de Mistra* (Paris, 1956), now generally superseded by Woodhouse, *Gemistos Plethon* (1986).

⁷⁵Items Nos. 17 and 18 in Cod. Marc. gr. 533; letters 4 and 5, Mohler 3, 425-7. See also Loenertz, "Biographie du Bessarion," 148-9; Storman, "Bessarion before Council," 138-40.

⁷⁶Capranica, Mohler, 3, 407, 6-10.

of an imperial delegation to Trebizond which sought an alliance against the Turks; he delivered an oration in the presence of the Emperor of Trebizond, John IV.⁷⁷ Upon his return to Constantinople, the Emperor then appointed him to the titular see of Nicaea (1437).⁷⁸ just prior to his participation in the Council of Florence (1438-9) as a member of the Byzantine delegation.

At the Council Bessarion was one of six orators selected to represent the Orthodox party at the Council. At first he staunchly defended the orthodox position. During the debates and lengthy negotiations, he was gradually convinced that the Latin faith was valid and that a formula could be found which could harmonize the Latin and Greek positions on the double Procession of the Holy Spirit. Hence, he became a vocal spokesman for union between the two Churches and was afforded the honour of proclaiming the Greek version of the Tome of Union on 6 July 1439 at the official ceremony of union.⁷⁹

Pope Eugenius IV granted him an annual pension of 300 florins for his unionist efforts (600 if he chose to reside in the Roman Curia). However, he preferred to return to the East and in October 1439 he sailed from Venice with part of the Byzantine delegation.

⁷⁷*Encomium of Trebizond*, ed. Lambros, *NH* 13 (1916): 145-204 (Item No. 27 in Cod. Marc. gr. 533). For dating see O. Lampsides, "Die Datierung des Ἐγκώμιον εις Τραπεζούντα von Kardinal Bessarion," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, XLVIII (1995), 291-2. The mission sought an alliance against the Turks and possibly also investigated the strength of support for holding a council to settle the doctrinal differences between the eastern and western churches.

See also discussion Storman, "Bessarion before Council," 133, 140-2; Loenertz, "Biographie du Bessarion," 131-2; Monfasani, "Bessarion's Latin Eulogists," 118 and n. 81.

⁷⁸Apostolis, *PG* 161, cxxxi; Platina, *PG* 161, cvi.

⁷⁹For a succinct account of Bessarion's participation in the Council, see Gill, *Personalities of Council*, 46-50.

While he was on his homeward journey, Pope Eugenius IV made him a cardinal at a papal consistory on 18 December 1439. In the face of opposition to the union after his return to Constantinople, in late 1440 Bessarion departed for Italy; in Florence on 10 December 1440 he received the insignia of the cardinalate with the title of Church of the Holy Apostles. Subsequently he became Bishop of Tuscany (1449), Uniate Patriarch of Constantinople (1463) and Bishop of Sabina (1468). He was also a serious candidate for pope in two conclaves (1455 and 1471).⁸⁰

Bessarion was much involved with papal efforts for monastic reform, especially of abbeys under the "Basilian" rule. At a General Chapter in Rome (1446) he introduced reforms and composed an epitome of the "Rule of St. Basil" for the superiors he had summoned. Subsequently in 1460 he was appointed visitor to all Greek monasteries in Italy.⁸¹

Bessarion also served on various missions as papal legate, which were often concerned with reconciling differences between the western powers, rectifying disagreements with the papacy and promoting crusades. In 1449 he undertook to reconcile Venice with Milan. From 1450-5 he governed the City of Bologna, during which time he supported restoration of the university. He was most active in crusade endeavours under Pope Pius II (1458-63). He enthusiastically worked for the success of the Congress of Mantua (1459) to which the Pope had called the Italian States and the western princes to organize a crusade.

⁸⁰Platina, *PG* 161, cviii-cvxi; Apostolis, *PG* 161, cxxxv-cxl; Capranica, Mohler, 3, 408-14; Ransano, *Annales omnium temporum*, 170-1. Also see the profile of Bessarion's western career in Gill, *Personalities of Council*, 50-4, and Labowsky, *DBI*, 696-8.

⁸¹See Gill, *Personalities of Council*, 50; Labowsky, *DBI*, 696-8.

Despite the poor response, Bessarion then ventured to Germany in answer to the appeals of the German envoys for a papal legate to settle their ecclesiastical and political differences and organize levies for the crusade. He was able to effect reconciliation in Austria and Hungary but he was unable to consolidate efforts for the crusade. As papal legate to Venice in 1463 he was instrumental in securing a declaration of war from Venice against the Turks; he accompanied the Venetian fleet to Ancona, which arrived just prior to the death of Pius II (14 August 1464) which ended the planned crusade. In 1469, during the pontificate of Paul II (1464-71), when the Emperor Frederick III came to Rome, Bessarion urged him to action against the Turks. In 1470 a commission of cardinals appointed to organize a response to the Ottoman threat met in his residence in Rome. These plans evaporated upon the death of Paul II (26 July 1471) but his successor, Sixtus IV, appointed Bessarion as legate to France in December 1471 in the hope of bringing France, Burgundy and England together in a crusade effort. In early 1472 the mission changed into securing a preliminary settlement of differences between the papacy and France. Even this limited goal was not achieved and Bessarion died on the return journey at Ravenna on 18 November 1472.⁸²

Bessarion also played an important part in humanist activities throughout his lengthy western career. He supervised the translating of Greek manuscripts into Latin commissioned by Pope Eugenius (d. 1447) and Pope Nicholas V (1447-55). The cardinal also financed an invaluable program for preservation of his Byzantine heritage in manuscript collecting, copying and translating; much of the work was undertaken by scribes and translators

⁸²Platina, *PG* 161, cviii-cvxi; Apostolis, *PG* 161, cxxxv-cxl; Capranica, Mohler, 3, 408-14; Ransano, *Annales omnium temporum*, 170-1. See also Gill, *Personalities of Council*, 50-4; Labowsky, *DBI*, 696-8.

employed in his residence in Rome. He eventually built up an immense library of the Eastern and Western patristic and classical heritage, which he bequeathed to the City of Venice (1468). He promoted philological, theological and philosophical discussion amongst a devoted group of humanist scholars who formed part of his household or were members of an informal group which met at his home. His involvement in the western segment of the so-called Plato-Aristotle debate (c. 1453-69) led to his confrontation with George of Trebizond. During the course of his struggle with George, the Cardinal also became involved in the activities of the first Roman printing press (1468-9) which culminated in the publication of his own major work, *In calumniatorem Platonis* (1469).

Thus Bessarion was one of the few Byzantine intellectuals able to cross the gulf which divided Latins and Greeks in the dying days of the Byzantine Empire. Critical to understanding his attitudes, hopes and aspirations on the eve of his encounter with western culture at the Council of Florence are the elements which shaped his early formation in the Byzantine East.