Part 1
General Introduction
Bessarion (1408-1472) was one of the most influential and at the same time fascinating Byzantine figures of the fifteenth century. Born in Trebizond on the Black Sea, he was educated in Constantinople and studied philosophy in the circle of Georgios Gemistos (Plethon), before embarking on a remarkable career: he became one of the main architects of the Union of the Byzantine and Roman Catholic Churches during the Council of Ferrara/Florence in 1438/39, a cardinal, three times a candidate for the papal throne, a renowned scholar and a patron of Byzantine learning after the Fall of Constantinople in 1453.

Many of his political undertakings ultimately failed or remained without long-lasting impact: the Union of the Churches that he was so eager to bring about was rescinded a few years after his death; the crusade against the Ottomans he had hoped would liberate his fatherland never took place; his ambitions to become Pope were never realised. Nevertheless, it was his efforts aimed at the preservation of Byzantine cultural heritage after the Fall of Constantinople that left the most profound and enduring legacy.

Bessarion was an avid collector of books during his entire lifetime. He was not rich by birth and in his youth he had to save money to be able to buy books. Later in life, especially after he became a cardinal and had considerable financial means at his disposal, he managed to assemble one of the largest private collections of Greek and Latin manuscripts of his time. Shortly before his death, he donated his entire library to the Republic of Venice and made it a condition of this bequest that his collection should be kept in

Bessarione (1408-1472) fu una delle personalità più affascinanti e, al contempo, uno dei Bizantini più influenti del XV secolo. Egli nacque a Tredizond sul Mar Nero e fu educato a Costantinopoli. Studiò filosofia alla scuola di Giorgio Gemisto (Plethon) per poi intraprendere una carriera prodigiosa: durante il Concilio di Ferrara/Firenze negli anni 1438/39 Bessarione fu uno dei principali artefici dell’unione tra la Chiesa bizantina e la Chiesa cattolica romana; fu cardinale per tre volte candidato al trono papale, studioso riconosciuto e patrono della cultura bizantina dopo la caduta di Costantinopoli nell’anno 1453.

Molte delle sue iniziative politiche alla fine non furono coronate da successo e non ebbero un impatto di lunga durata: l’unione delle Chiese, nella quale pure egli aveva profuso grande impegno, fu sciolta solo qualche anno dopo la sua morte; la crociata contro i Turchi nella quale riponeva la speranza di liberare la sua patria non ebbe mai luogo; le sue ambizioni di diventare Papa non poterono mai realizzarsi. I suoi sforzi volta a volta per salvare e conservare le culture bizantine che davano spunto alla cultura bizantina dopo la caduta di Costantinopoli nell’anno 1453.

Per tutta la vita, Bessarione fu un avido collezionista di libri. Non era ricco di nascita; nella sua giovinezza aveva dovuto risparmiare per poter acquistare libri. Più tardi, dopo essere diventato cardinale e avere mezzi considerevoli a sua disposizione, riuscì a creare una delle più grandi collezioni private di manoscritti greci e latini del suo tempo. Pur prima della sua morte, Bessarione donò la sua intera biblioteca alla Repubblica di Venezia,
one place and not sold or otherwise dispersed, that it remain accessible to all who wish to consult it and that a library be built to house it

It is now impossible to determine whether the publication of *Comparatio*’s book actually played any decisive role in Bessarion’s failure to become Pope during the conclave of 1458. What is certain is that later during the same year, after the conclave, Bessarion retired to the baths of Viterbo and asked his associates to procure for him some copies of *Comparatio*’s work and other materials that reflected his adversary’s views. It was then that the work on his book in defence of both Plato and Aristotle came to be called *In Calumniatorem Platonis*, the *Calumniator of Plato*. Bessarion’s initial plan was to write a reply to each of the three parts of the tripartite treatise written by Georgios Trapezuntios and to show that his adversary’s arguments were unfounded and, what is more, that he lacked the necessary understanding not only of Plato’s but of Aristotle’s thinking. But, also of Aristotle, whom he wished to eulogise.

It was not unusual for Byzantine scholars to engage in extensive polemical debates, just a few years earlier, for instance, Bessarion’s teacher, Plethon, upon returning home from the Council of Ferrara/Florence (1438/39), had written a book in which he had sought to underline the advantages of Platonic philosophy over the teachings of Aristotle. Plethon’s book met with fierce criticism from Cennadios Scholarios, another important intellectual figure of the time, who in turn provoked a further response from Tryphon, Bessarion’s reply to *Comparatio*. Trapezuntios’ book could have become a more episode in the scholarly controversy over Pla-

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to-tonism. The political situation, the geographical location of the new debate and the overall cultural setting were very different this time. Bessarion and Trapezuntios resided in the West. The Byzantine Empire, their homeland, had been conquered by the Ottomans in 1453, and they were no longer at home, as they had been previously. Both were abandoned by their contemporaries. Their debate was taking place not on

modeling as condition of the laocoon that she has raccolto restante in un singolo luogo, che non fosse venduta o altrimenti dispersa, che rimanesse accessibile a chiunque fosse interessato a consultarla e che una biblioteca fosse costruita per ospitare quell’oggetto che – giustamente – considerava essere un autoritario teso. Dalla donazione bessarionea sarebbe nata la Biblioteca Marciana.

La donazione della biblioteca bessarionea alla città di Venezia e nella storia della civiltà europea un evento ben noto; altri sforzi bessarionei rivolti a preservare l’eredità bizantina dopo la caduta di Costantinopoli, invece, sono per certi versi ancora poco conosciuti.

Una delle conquiste più luminose del percorso di Bessarione è rappresentata da un trattato filosofico intitolato *De Differentiis Platonis et Aristotelis*. (A Comparison of the Philosophers Plato and Aristotle). In its seemingly neutral title, this book was not a sober comparative analysis of Platonic and Aristotelian teachings, but an aggressive attack on Aristotelianism from Gennadios Scholarios, another important intellectual figure of the time, which in turn provoked a further response from Tryphon, Bessarion’s reply to *Comparatio*. Trapezuntios’ book could have become a more episode in the scholarly controversy over Platonism and Aristotelianism, a battle that had begun in 1438/39, had written a book in which he had sought to underline the advantages of Platonic philosophy over the teachings of Aristotle. 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ly in front of a Byzantine audience, but they also had to keep in mind a Western audience, which spoke another language (Latin) and relied on a different set of authors to support their views and opinions.

All these factors had a significant influence on the course of the debate between Trapezuntius and Bessarion and ultimately shaped the work In Colesium Platonis, which Bessarion started to write in 1458, but finished more than ten years later, in 1469, at the time when the ripples created by the publication of Trapezuntius’ Comparatio in 1459, it had certainly subsided and the quarrel between the Papal secretary and a Roman cardinal must have long forgotten. In 1469 Bessarion left to posterity a monumental work in six books, and in two versions, Latin and Greek, which gave an impetus to the study of the Platonic heritage in the West.

In addition to the significance of Bessarion’s book in defining the role of the study of Byzantine Platonic tradi- tion, the material preserved in the Marciana Library is also interesting from another perspective. It sheds a unique light on the working practices of a Byzantine author. The preserved documentation includes not on- ly the final copies of the In Colesium Platonis that had been in possession of its author, but also a number of drafts that Bessarion made in the process of com- posing the book, with handwritten remarks by him and the members of his learned entourage, whose advice he reg- ularly sought in course of his work, as well as other man- uscripts that he consulted during his work and even a text by his ‘ghost writer’ Giovanni Gatti, who provided him with much of the raw material he used for the com- position of the final version of book 3.

All this material clearly demonstrates that writing a book is not a solitary activity practiced in the solitude of a studio or a monk’s cell, but a collective undertaking that implies intense collaboration with others over a long period of time and a continuous effort of rewriting and correcting. If this was the way Bessarion followed while working on his book, then it is quite prob- able that other Byzantine writers before him worked on their texts in a similar way. As direct evidence for the working practices of Byzantine authors before Bessari- on is very scarce, the material presented at the exhibi- tion is particularly valuable and revealing.

1 Final Redaction

This cabinet contains manuscripts Gr. Z. 198 (744) and Lat. Z. 229 (1695). These are the handwritten copies of Bessarion’s monumental work in Greek and in Latin re- spectively, commissioned by Bessarion for his own use. They once had a place in his library in Rome. Use of parch- ment, gold leaf, rich ornamentation with gilded elements underline the craftsmanship to support their views and opinions. 

La risposta di Bessarione al Trapezuntius avrebbe potuto contituirsi semplicemente un ulteriore episodio all’interno della controversia platonico-aristotelica in at- tu, giacché egli non aveva ancora una luce insita sulla monumentalità di lavoro degli autori bizantini. I documenti conservati, nella Marciana comprendono un solo lavoro di Bessarione (In Colesium Platonis) che era appartenuto- te all’autore stesso, ma anche un certo numero di bozze che Bessarione aveva realizzato nel processo di redazio- ne dell’opera e che contengono delle note scritte a mano da Bessarone stesso e dagli studiosi, membri del suo entourage, con i quali Bessarone durante il suo lavoro regolarmente si scontrava, nonché alcuni altri manu- scritti che Bessarione consultava durante il suo lavoro e persino un testo redatto dal suo ghost-writer Giovanni Gatti. Questi materiali sono molto interessanti, anche per un’entire delicazione di base che il Cardinale usò per ultimare le versioni dei suoi ultimi lavori. Le relazioni tra autore e materiale esposto nell’ambito della presente mostra è tanto richieste quanto necessarie a comprendere i modi di lavoro degli autori bizantini.

1 La versione finale

La versione finale dell’opera contenuta in Gr. Z. 198 (744) e Lat. Z. 229 (1695) si trova nella Biblioteca Marciana conservata da Bessarone stesso e dagli studiosi, membri del suo entourage, con i quali Bessarone durante il suo lavoro regolarmente si scontrava, nonché alcuni altri manuscritti che Bessarione consultava durante il suo lavoro e persino un testo redatto dal suo ghost-writer Giovanni Gatti. Questi materiali sono molto interessanti, anche per una delicazione di base che il Cardinale usò per ultimare le versioni dei suoi ultimi lavori. Le relazioni tra autore e materiale esposto nell’ambito della presente mostra è tanto richieste quanto necessarie a comprendere i modi di lavoro degli autori bizantini.

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The two portraits are taken from Paolo Giovio’s Elpis Vivorum Literis Illustrum. We should not expect these portrayals to convey a realistic impression about what the two protagonists actually looked like in real life. They are highly stylised images, showing in the case of Bessarion, two protagonists actually looked like in real life. They are not suggesting his bulbous nose. The most realistic image of Bessarion is the tempera on wood by Gentile Bellini, and two members of the Scuola della Carità in prayer with the Bessarion reliquary, presently held in the Marciana Library. It was commissioned in 1458 by Bessarion, who was very eager at that time to have a copy of his adversary’s book in a shortest possible time so that he could begin his work in defence of Plato. What is very surprising, however, is that this copy does not contain Bessarion’s comments and remarks, as we would expect, had this been the Cardinal’s actual working copy. It is therefore quite possible that this is only one of several copies that Bessarion’s circle, but that he actually used a different copy in the process of his own work.

In difesa di Platone

L’invenzione della stampa è stata un punto di inflexione nella produzione e distribuzione dei libri, ossia un passaggio da libri realizzati a mano ai libri stampati, che fu caratterizzato da un’importante trasformazione tecnologica nel modo di produrre e distribuire i libri, ossia l’invenzione della stampa. Durante la sua giovinezza e la maggior parte della sua vita adulta, i ‘libri’ erano coi- piai a mano da scribi e scribina; così come del resto era avvenuto per secoli. Verso la fine della vita di Bessarione, la diffusione della nuova tecnologia iniziò a trasformare la cultura del libro. Con l’introduzione della stampa, i libri divennero più economici da produrre e fu possibile stampare un numero maggiore di copie, raggiungendo così un pubblico molto più vasto.

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In difesa di Platone
3 Working with Plato

This cabinet contains two manuscripts that illustrate Bessarion’s interest in Platonic texts and his expertise in this subject. Cod. Gr. Z. 199 (604) is open at a section of the manuscript that contains Bessarion’s criticism of the Latin translation of Plato’s Laws. The main text on the page was copied for Bessarion by one of the scribes working for him in such a way as to leave large margins around the text, which Bessarion then filled with his own corrections and remarks. In the third section of this volume, an article by Sergei Mariev entitled “Tracking Changes and Corrections in Bessarion’s Manuscript” reconstructs in detail how Bessarion made corrections to his texts. Cod. Gr. Z. 526 (776) contains excerpts from many Ancient Greek authors, which were produced by Bessarion himself either when he was a student in Constantinople and in Mystras on the Peloponnese or after his arrival in Italy, but the exact dating of these excerpts is disputed. The manuscript is open at a page that contains Bessarion’s excerpts from Plato’s Laws.

4 Bessarion’s Plato

Bessarion discovered a large number of mistakes in Georgios Trapezuntios’ translation of Plato’s Laws into Latin and severely criticized it. The criticism of Trapezuntios’ translation of the Laws constitutes book V of the In Calumniatorem Platonis. While working on Trapezuntios’ translation, Bessarion used a different copy of Plato’s Laws that was also in his possession, namely Cod. Gr. Z. 187 (742), also displayed here. The text Bessarion actually used in the process of correcting Trapezuntios’ translation did not contain the passages that Plethon had deleted, but provided a number of readings that helped Bessarion to clarify the meaning of Plato’s text, which had been obfuscated in Trapezuntios’ translation. Bessarion identified many errors in the tradition latina of the Laws of Plato eseguita dal Trapezunzio e lo critico della traduzione latina delle Leggi ad opera del Trapezunzio costituisce il libro V dell’In Calumniatorem Platonis. Durante il suo esame critico della traduzione del Traperzunzio, Bessarione aveva però un’altra copia delle Leggi platoniche, che si trovava altrove in suo possesso e non è noto se la copia che è anch’essa esposta nella presente vetrina. Il testo che Bessarione utilizzò effettivamente nel processo di traduzione risultò essere la copia di lavoro del cardinale. E quindi molto probabile che questa fosse solo una delle copie che circolavano nella cerchia di Bessarone, ma che in realtà egli utilizzasse una copia diversa nell’ambito del suo lavoro.

3 Il lavoro sul testo platonico

La presente vetrina illustra l’interesse di Bessarione per i testi platonici e la sua competenza in materia. Il cod. Gr. Z. 199 (604) è aperto alla sezione del manoscritto che contiene la critica di Bessarione alla traduzione latina delle Leggi platoniche realizzata da Giorgio Trapezunzio. Il corpo del testo venne copiato per Bessarione da uno degli scribi che lavoravano per lui in modo da lasciare ampi margini intorno al testo, margini che Bessarione poi riempì con le proprie correzioni e osservazioni. Nella terza sezione del presente catalogo si trova un saggio redatto da Sergei Mariev e intitolato «Tracking Changes and Corrections in Bessarion’s Manuscript» che ricostruisce dettagliatamente la modalità con cui Bessarione apportò le correzioni ai suoi testi. Il codice Gr. Z. 526 (776) contiene eszerpte tratti da molti autori greci antichi e realizzati da Bessarione quando era studente a Costantinopoli e a Mistra, nel Peloponneso, oppure dopo il suo arrivo in Italia, la datazione esatta di questi brani è in ogni caso controversa. Il manoscritto è aperto su una pagina che contiene eszerpte bessarioniane tratti dalle Leggi di Platon.

4 Il Platone di Bessarione

E durante il suo periodo di studio a Mistra, nel Peloponneso, sotto la supervisione di Giorgio Gemito (Platon), che Bessarione getta le basi della sua profonda conoscenza della filosofia platonica. Il codice Gr. Z. 188 qui esposto contiene una copia delle Leggi di Platon: un tempo appartenuta a Platon. Fu Platon a cancellare alcuni passaggi del testo platonico: il codice è aperto al f. 6, che presenta un passaggio del testo platonico che è stato mutilato. Il passo cancellato dal maestro di Bessarione contiene le righe 636c7-d5 del dialogo e recita in traduzione italiana:

Certo tutti noi biasimiamo il mito di Ganimede, ritenuto opera dei Cretesi. Costoro, in effetti, ritenendo che le loro leggi derivavano da Zeus, gli attribuirono, oltre agli altri, pure questo mito, per poter godere anche di un tale piacere con il pretesto di seguire il dio. Ma lasciamo perdere il mito.

(Platon – Tutti gli scritti, a cura di G. Reale, trad. a cura di R. Radice, Milano, Bompiani, 2000)
Bessarion’s book was born as a response to Georgios Trapezutios. During the long ten year that Bessarion spent working on this treatise, he made significant changes to the original plan of the book. The most significant restructuring of the treatise occurred when Bessarion decided to replace the original third book with the material that had been provided to him by a member of his entourage, the Dominican Giovanni Gatti. More details on Giovanni Gatti and his work are provided in John Monfasani’s article in the third part of this volume. Cod. Lat. Z. 226 (1636) on display here reflects an earlier phase of Bessarion’s work on the treatise and is open at the beginning of the ‘old’ book 3, which was then replaced by the material provided by his theological advisor. The manuscript Lat. VI, 61 (2592), open here at the first section of Gatti’s book, illustrates the initial stages of the process whereby Bessarion integrated Gatti’s material into his own masterpiece.

6 De Natura et Arte

De Natura et Arte (On Nature and Art) is the title of the sixth and final book of Bessarion’s treatise (On Nature and Art). The work on this concluding section also goes back to 1458. In that year, Georgios Trapezunzio not only published his Comparatio, but also caused an intrigue among the learned Byzantines who were close to Bessarion. He intercepted a letter Bessarion had written in reply to a question from Theodore Gaza. Pretending to believe that the letter he had intercepted was written by Bessarion, but from Bessarion’s secretary, Isaia of Cyprus, Trapezuntios hastily critiqued the arguments it contained, made several copies of this critical letter, and sent them to other scholars. He explained this pamphlet through Greek-speaking intellectuals. Being secretary to the Pope, Trapezuntios claimed the right to criticize the missive of a cardinal’s secretary, but counted on the fact that everybody who was delved by his theological advisor. The manuscript Lat. VI, 61 (2592), which is open here at the first section of the Notata per Ioannem Gattum (f. 103r) reads “Ista sunt notata per Ioannem Gattum theologum” (These are the Notata of the theologian Ioannes Gatti). This line was crossed out by Bessarion when he started working on the material stemming from this ‘ghost writer’ in order to transform it into his own text. It is important to stress that Bessarion’s use of Gatti’s text is not a plagiarism, in the sense of a deceitful representation of another person’s language, thoughts, ideas or expressions as one’s own original work, but rather it is more comparable to the practices of a Renaissance artist’s workshop, where gifted assistants were entrusted with creating, for example, the hands of a figure or a landscape background for the work of the master, who subsequently integrated their preliminary work with the rest of his own masterpiece.

5 A Change of Plan: Gatti’s Notate and the Reworking of the Treatise

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5 Cambio de programa: las Notas de Gatti y la re-elaboracion del tratado

El libro de Bessarion nasce como respuesta a Giorgio Trapezunzio. Durante el largo periodo (diez años) que Bessarion trascurre trabajando en este tratado, él aporró modificaciones significativas al proyecto original del epopea. La reestructuración más significativa del tratado avviene cuando Bessarione decide de sostenerlo esa que era originariamente el libro III con el material que él era el distinto forjador del directorio, el dominico Giovanni Gatti. Maggiore deatla los Gatti y el su labor se realizo en el saggio di John Monfasani, contenido en la sección terza del pre-sente catálogo. El codice Lat. Z. 226 (1636) que aporó reflite una fase precedente del laboro de Bessarione ed es aperto all’inizio di quello che era originariamente il libro III e che in seguito fu sostituito dal materiale fornito suo del consiliente in materia teologica. El manoscritto Lat. VI, 61 (2592), qui aperto alla pri-ma sezione del Notato di Gatti, illustra la fase iniziale del proceso whereby Bessarion integrated Gatti’s material into his own masterpiece.

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in one Greek and two Latin versions. The earlier Latin version was completed by Bessarion himself and is written in his own hand. The final Latin version, which eventually became book 6 of the in Caelumstorum Platonis, underwent an extensive process of correction in the hands of yet another member of Bessarion’s entourage, Niccolò Perotti.

7 Printer’s Copy

The manuscript Lat. Z. 228 (1671) on display here is the Latin version of s.Caelumstorum Platonis, which was used for the production of the printed version of this book in 1469. The black stains visible to the right were caused by the typographer, who was handling this copy during his work. This manuscript underlines the exceptional richness and variety of the material relating to Bessarion’s work on his treatise, since even this small step is reflected in the trove of the documents preserved.

8 Latin edile príncipes

Bessarion had in his possession two copies of the printed version of his book. The process of correction did not stop after he received the book back from the printer, as he felt the need to correct in his own hand a number of errors that he discovered in the printed version. Another interesting feature is the presence of Greek quotes integrated into the Latin text that are visible on the page on display here. The use of Latin and Greek script side by side was no small technical achievement in the early days of book printing. The Greek passages integrated into the Latin text do not carry any diacritical marks and exhibit numerous mistakes that can be explained as originating from confusion of similar-looking Greek letters, which is a clear sign that the printing of these passages presented a challenge for the typographer.

7 La copia del tipografo

Il manoscritto Lat. Z. 228 (1671) qui esposto è la versione latina dello stesso trattato, che fu utilizzata per la realizzazione della versione a stampa del libro del 1469. Le macchie nere visibili sulla destra sono state causate dal tipografo che maneggiava la copia durante il suo lavoro. Il manoscritto sottolinea l’eccellente richiesta e varietà del materiale che riflette la realizzazione della versione a stampa di Del Natura et Arte: persino di questo breve passaggio nel processo che conduce alla produzione del libro a stampa si conserva traccia nella infinita mole dei documenti trasmessi.

8 L’edile príncipes latina

Bessarion era in possesso di due copie della versione a stampa del suo libro. Il processo di correzione non si concluse con l’uscita a stampa del volume: dopo aver ricevuto il libro dal tipografo, infatti, Bessarion sentì il bisogno di correggere di suo pugno una serie di errori che aveva scoperto nella versione a stampa. Un’altra caratteristica interessante è la presenza di citazioni greche integrate nel testo latino che sono visibili nella pagina qui esposta. L’uso di caratteri latini e greci all’interno dello stesso testo era una conquista tecnica di non poco rilievo agli albori della stampa libraria. I passi greci integrati nel testo latino non recano alcun segno di decriscitico e presentano numerosi errori che si possono spiegare riconducendoli alla confusione generata da lettere greche aves aves acutissimo simile, segno evidente che la stampa di questi passi rappresentava una sfida per il tipografo del tempo.
This cabinet contains two reprints of the Latin version of the editio princeps, which were published after Bessarion's death. On the one hand, the reprints illustrate the technological progress achieved during the thirty years that separate the appearance of the editio princeps in 1469 and the first reprint in 1503. The Greek quotes in the Latin text have been thoroughly corrected and were now possible to use in print diacritical marks crucial for the correct representation of the system of Greek writing as it was practiced in Byzantium. In the second place, the existence of two reprints, issued in 1503 and 1516, is an indication that Bessarion's book enjoyed a considerable reception during the first half of the sixteenth century.

The last cabinet of the exhibition is dedicated to the interest of the modern scholarship in Bessarion's philosophical treatise In Calumniatorem Platonis. The pioneer in the field of Bessarion studies was the German philologist and theologian Ludwig Mohler (16.07.1883-25.12.1943), who completed a first modern critical edition of a large part of Bessarion's philosophical work. Even though he published only books 1-4 and, in a different volume, the De Naturae et Arte (book 6), thus omitting the important book 5 containing Bessarion's criticism of the Latin translation of Plato's Laws, Mohler is undoubtedly the pioneer of modern philological research, who opened up Bessarion's oeuvre for the scholarship of the twentieth century. It was not until the twenty-first century, however, that new critical editions and translations of Bessarion's treatise and related texts have started to appear.