

1 An Itinerant Quest for Knowledge

Summary 1 Trebizond. – 2 Constantinople. – 3 Mistra. – 4 Bessarion and the Influence of Trebizond, Constantinople, and Mistra.

The tumultuous period spanning the thirteenth to the fifteenth century saw the relentless expansion of various powers, including the Ottomans, Venetians, and other Italian lords, who gradually encroached upon the territories of the Byzantine Empire. This protracted process of territorial conquest was a central factor contributing to the depiction of the final epochs of the Byzantine Empire, characterised by pervasive crisis and decline. Concurrently, the population residing within the Byzantine domain, whether in the imperial capital of Constantinople or its peripheral regions, faced impoverishment and demographic decline. Nevertheless, amid the backdrop of this era fraught with socio-political upheaval, there emerged vibrant intellectual hubs, notably Constantinople, Mistra, Thessalonica, and Trebizond. It was within this rich cultural tapestry that Bessarion¹ lived his formative years, ultimately embarking on a transformative journey that culminated in his definitive relocation to Italy. The trajectory from Trebizond to Constantinople and onwards to Mistra delineated the path traversed by Bessarion prior to his choice to move to Italy, imprinting upon him the indelible marks of these diverse intellectual and urban landscapes.

The distinctive characteristics and intellectual vibrancy of these cities profoundly shaped Bessarion's *Weltanschauung*, encapsulating his intellectual persona within the nexus of cultural ferment and scholarly discourse.

¹ Bessarion's original name was Basil. He changed his name to Bessarion upon becoming a monk in 1423. See biographical accounts mentioned in note 2.

Thus, the subsequent exposition provides a comprehensive overview of the cultural milieus permeating these urban centres, intertwined with pivotal biographical facets of Bessarion's life. It is pertinent to note that the chapter refrains from offering a redundant biographical narrative of Bessarion, recognising the abundance of existing accounts documenting his life and contributions.²

1 Trebizond

Bessarion's birth in 1408 is traced to the city of Trebizond, nestled along the shores of the Black Sea.³ This ancient city, renowned as the capital of the Empire of Trebizond from 1204 until 1461, epitomised a vibrant cosmopolitan hub teeming with intellectual vigour. Its cosmopolitan allure stemmed primarily from its strategic geographical location, important as a pivotal node along lucrative trading routes. Consequently, Trebizond emerged as a melting pot of diverse cultures, a captivating crossroads where European and Oriental influences mingled and intertwined.⁴ For scholars and historians alike, Trebizond remains an enigmatic anomaly within the annals of the Eastern Mediterranean. Its unique character defies conventional categorisation, as succinctly articulated by Frederick Lauritzen: "Trebizond does not represent a simple and clear-cut legacy of the Greco-Roman world, but rather a continuation of those aspects of culture of the eastern Mediterranean which require the study of numerous languages and often unfamiliar contexts. The central and most striking problem remains the lack of sources".⁵

Situated at the crossroads of divergent and often conflicting powers, Trebizond emerged as a microcosm of resilience amid the tumultuous currents of history. The city, like many others of its kind, weathered the storms of political and economic upheaval with characteristic fortitude, adapting to rapid changes while navigating through the complexities of shifting alliances and rivalries.

During the thirteenth century, Trebizond was embroiled in a series of challenges exacerbated by external pressures. Sultan Kaykaus I's capture of the Black Sea port of Sinope in 1214 severed vital communication links between Trebizond, Byzantium, and Western harbours such as Venice and Genoa. This disruption to maritime trade routes dealt a significant blow to the city's economic stability, forcing it to recalibrate its strategies for survival amidst uncertainty. Furthermore, the encroachment of the Mongols in the 1220s and 1230s unleashed widespread devastation across the lands belonging to the Empire of Trebizond. The Mongol onslaught, marked by its ferocity and relentless expansionism, plunged the region into chaos, leaving

² Cf., among others, Tambrun-Krasker, "Bessarion"; Zorzi, "La vita del Bessarione. Cronologia"; Mariev, "Bessarion, Cardinal"; Del Soldato, "Basil [Cardinal] Bessarion".

³ There are different theses about Bessarion's date of birth. I take as convincing the year 1408 as argued by John Monfasani, "Platina, Capranica, and Perotti"; cf. also Tambrun-Krasker, "Bessarion", 9. For a recent reassessment of the evidence about Bessarion's date of birth, cf. Kennedy, "Bessarion's date of birth", who proposes to set the birth in 1403.

⁴ Fallmerayer, *Original-Fragmente, Chroniken, Inschriften und anderes Materiale*; Карпов, *L'Impero di Trebisonda Venezia Genova e Roma 1204-1461*; Карпов, *История Трапезундской империи*; Eastmond (ed.), *Byzantium's Other Empire*.

⁵ Lauritzen, "Bessarion's Political Thought", 153.

behind a trail of destruction and disarray. Despite these relentless scourges and adversities, Trebizond steadfastly clung to its independence, forging a path towards prosperity through internal cohesion and resilience.

At the heart of Trebizond's social fabric lay its diverse population, a mosaic of cultures and ethnicities that lent richness and dynamism to its bustling markets and lively streets. The majority of Trebizond's inhabitants traced their lineage to the Greek diaspora, their presence infusing the city with a distinct Hellenic flavour. Alongside this predominant Greek core, Trebizond played host to a kaleidoscope of peoples, including Armenians, Georgians, Turks, and Italians, each contributing their unique traditions and customs to the vibrant tapestry of urban life. Of particular note were the Italian communities, whose presence in Trebizond bore testament to the city's role as a nexus of Mediterranean commerce. Genoa and Venice, in particular, established their own quarters within the city, leveraging their maritime prowess to forge lucrative trade agreements with local authorities. These enclaves served as bustling hubs of activity, where merchants from distant shores converged to engage in the bustling trade that characterised Trebizond's economic landscape.

Initially based on economic grounds, Trebizond's cosmopolitanism allowed the spontaneous and easy circulation of knowledge between different cultures. Outcomes of this situation can be seen in the artistic production and scientific works. On the one hand, the conjunction of different styles from East and West is reflected in the paintings and architecture of the Church of Hagia Sophia of Trebizond.⁶ On the other hand, interactions with the Mongols brought new scientific knowledge to Trebizond, which made the city more cosmopolitan than Constantinople in terms of fourteenth-century astronomical studies.⁷

An intriguing artefact from the fourteenth century, an anonymous almanac pertaining to the city of Trebizond, has survived. Almanacs of this nature served as compendiums of essential data facilitating the organisation of societal affairs, encompassing all strata of Trapezuntine society. Within its pages lay a comprehensive array of information, from agricultural cycles to commercial endeavours, meticulously structured through computational tables detailing the celestial movements of the Sun, Moon, and planets throughout the year.

This almanac, covering the period from 12 March 1336 to 12 March 1337, is a testament to the sophisticated fusion of Greek and Islamic calendar systems. While its geographical accuracy regarding western regions is questionable, the almanac is generally reliable in its depictions of areas to the South and East. Beyond its practical utility, the significance of this document extends into two distinct realms. First, it illuminates the profound ties between celestial science and the organisation of societal structures. The meticulous recording of astrological data underscores the pivotal role played by the understanding of celestial movements in shaping daily life, from agricultural practices to commercial transactions. In essence, the almanac reveals the symbiotic relationship between celestial observation and societal order. Second, the almanac offers intriguing insights into the socio-economic and geopolitical dynamics of mid-fourteenth-century Trebizond.

⁶ Eastmond, *Byzantium's Other Empire*, 59-102.

⁷ Mercier, *An Almanac for Trebizond for the Year 1336*, 13-17.

Its emphasis on orienting economic activities and political relations towards Turkish and Persian spheres rather than Byzantine ones suggests a subtle yet significant shift in the city's strategic outlook. This departure from traditional Byzantine affiliations hints at broader transformations occurring within the region during this period, highlighting the dynamic interplay between political allegiances and economic imperatives.⁸

Trebizond combined its Christian and Hellenic core with the broader Arabic and Persian intellectual worlds. This attitude towards the Orient is exemplified by the activities of the Byzantine scholar Gregory Chioniadēs (1240/50-1320).⁹ To cultivate his interests in astronomy and mathematics, Chioniadēs travelled from Constantinople to Persia with the support of Alexios II Komnenos, Emperor of Trebizond. He studied in Tabriz and fulfilled his duty as bishop in the meantime. When returning, he stopped in Trebizond, bringing with him a collection of astronomical manuscripts which he translated into Greek from Persian and Arabic. The strategic position of Trebizond likely facilitated such linguistic and intellectual exchanges in the fourteenth century, in parallel with its commercial and political trajectories, hence making Chioniadēs a non-exceptional case of cultural brokerage. Once back in Constantinople, Chioniadēs, allegedly on account of his long sojourn in the Muslim world, was asked to make a public profession of Orthodox faith. The text of his profession contains an exposition of all key articles of Orthodox Christianity in opposition to the beliefs of Chaldeans, Muslims, and Jews. The aim of this profession was also to define distinctions between Christianity and concurrent systems of belief.¹⁰ This was likely a reaction to the religious syncretism that appears to have shaped Trebizond during the Komnenian era, a consequence of the frequent local contacts amongst Christians and Muslims at that time.¹¹

All in all, Trebizond's cultural milieu during the fourteenth century intricately wove together influences from both Byzantine and distant Eastern and Western spheres. While the Byzantine legacy undoubtedly permeated Trebizond's cultural landscape, the city also maintained a keen awareness of developments beyond its immediate borders. Manuscripts and artistic endeavours from this period offer a fascinating glimpse into the dynamic interplay between Muslim and Christian traditions, illustrating a rich tapestry of cultural exchange and hybridity. This blend of influences is palpable in various facets of Trapezuntine society, shaping not only artistic expression but also social and religious practices. The synthesis of Muslim and Christian elements is evident in the diverse range of stylistic traits found in the arts, reflecting a nuanced fusion of aesthetic sensibilities. The study of astronomy serves as another illuminating example of this cultural amalgamation, with scholars drawing from both Byzantine and Islamic sources in their pursuit of astronomical knowledge. The juxtaposition of East and West within the cultural milieu of Trebizond engendered a subtle but palpable tension, one that likely left an indelible mark on individuals like Bessarion during their formative years. Indeed, the cultural crosscurrents of Trebizond provided fertile ground for the cultivation of intellectual curiosity

8 Peers, "Trebizond and its World through Manuscripts", 103-26.

9 Pingree, "Gregory Chioniadēs and Paleologan Astronomy".

10 Westerink, "La profession de foi de Grégoire Chioniadès".

11 Shukurov, "Between Peace and Hostility".

and eclectic interests. For Bessarion, in particular, this environment facilitated the germination of intellectual seeds that would later blossom into his mature scholarly pursuits.

Although Bessarion relocated to Constantinople in pursuit of better higher education, he left us with a eulogy of Trebizond which he likely composed around 1422.¹² This text, while adorned with rhetorical flourishes and not strictly a historical document, underscores the significant role played in his formative years by Trebizond's diverse and vibrant multicultural ambience. Bessarion extolled the cosmopolitan nature of Trebizond and highlighted the pivotal role of its harbour in facilitating commerce and cross-cultural interactions. He leveraged these themes to suggest Trebizond as a potential model for the future of the Byzantine Empire.

Due to his intellectual talent, Bessarion was sent to Constantinople by the metropolite of Trebizond, with the hope that he would cultivate his intellectual qualities and make a career. His formative studies took place from 1416 to 1431 in Constantinople, where he became a monk in 1423, then priest in 1430.

2 Constantinople

The impact on the Byzantine Empire of the Fourth Crusade in 1204 is widely acknowledged as one of the most dramatic events in its history, marking a profound turning point that reverberated for centuries to come. With the sacking of Constantinople, the heart of the Byzantine Empire, the political and cultural landscape of the region was irrevocably altered. Relocation of the imperial capital to Nicaea and subsequent efforts to reclaim Constantinople showed the resilience of the Byzantine spirit, yet the empire never fully regained its former stature.

For over half a century, the Byzantine Empire grappled with the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade, striving to restore its political and territorial integrity. The reconquest of Constantinople in 1261 was a symbolic triumph, signalling a brief resurgence of Byzantine power. However, this victory proved to be ephemeral, as the empire continued to face internal challenges and external threats.

Despite sporadic periods of stability and prosperity, the Byzantine Empire suffered a protracted decline in the centuries following the Fourth Crusade. Struggling to assert its authority amidst a shifting geopolitical landscape, the empire found itself increasingly marginalised on the world stage. While efforts were made to adapt to changing circumstances and preserve the legacy of Byzantine civilisation, the empire remained a shadow of its former glory. Ultimately, the once-mighty Byzantine Empire succumbed to the inexorable advance of the Ottoman forces in 1453. The fall of Constantinople marked the end of an era, bringing an end to nearly a millennium of Byzantine rule and fundamentally altering the course of history in the region.¹³

Unlike that of Trebizond, the environment of Constantinople had experienced a great loss in terms of cultural and economic capital so that its establishment could not view external cultural influences without some suspicion.

¹² Lauritzen, "Bessarion's Political Thought"; Kennedy, *Two Works on Trebizond*.

¹³ Nicol, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium, 1261-1453*.

Judging from the extant sources, education in Constantinople was still arranged as a system similar, but not exactly equal, to what in Latin-speaking Europe was known as *Trivium* and *Quadrivium*. This curriculum provided a first level with rhetoric, grammar, and logic (*Trivium*), then a second, higher level of education consisting of arithmetic, music theory, geometry, and astronomical studies (*Quadrivium*).¹⁴

Between 1261 and 1453, the Byzantine Empire grappled with a tumultuous period marked by political instability, internal strife, and external pressures, culminating in its eventual downfall. The era saw a series of civil wars among imperial families in Constantinople, exacerbating divisions within the empire and undermining political unity. Additionally, the emergence of charismatic figures further weakened the authority of emperors, contributing to a sense of uncertainty and unrest.

Despite facing deep-seated crises, the ruling class of Constantinople remained steadfast in their belief in the supremacy of the Byzantine Empire as the optimal form of governance. This unwavering commitment to imperial authority, coupled with a reluctance to separate the spheres of church and state, perpetuated a disconnect between the ruling elite and the broader population. The Byzantine Emperor, often referred to as the Emperor of the Romans, was revered as the sole legitimate ruler, further entrenching the hierarchical structures of power.

Yet, this entrenched political ideology ultimately proved detrimental to the empire's ability to address the growing discontent among its citizens. Increasing poverty, exacerbated by economic pressures and external threats from Latin and Ottoman forces, fuelled social unrest and popular discontent. Despite the resilience of the ruling class, their detachment from the everyday realities faced by the common people left them ill-equipped to quell the simmering tensions that pervaded Byzantine society. All this, along with never exhausted tendencies to isolationism and chauvinism, failed to reinforce the power of Constantinople in foreign policy,¹⁵ but rather accentuated a proto-nationalistic movement that considered Byzantium the heir of the glorious Greek civilisation (Hellenism).¹⁶

The environment Bessarion encountered in Constantinople in the 1420s was dramatically influenced by the theological controversies and political struggles of the fourteenth century.¹⁷ Those episodes had a strong impact on astronomical studies and sciences in general, so it is worth briefly recollecting them.¹⁸ After the Council of Constantinople of 1351, the monastic, mystic movement originated at Mount Athos, known as hesychasm,¹⁹ achieved cultural hegemony. The theology of Gregorius Palamas (1296-1359), supporting the hesychasts and condemning Latin theology as heretic, was

¹⁴ Cacouras, "La philosophie et les sciences du *Trivium* et du *Quadrivium*"; Katsiampoura, "Faith or knowledge?".

¹⁵ Nicol, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium, 1261-1453*.

¹⁶ Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*.

¹⁷ Bardi, "The Relationships between Scientific and Theological Discourses".

¹⁸ Essential studies on this topic, to which I am indebted: Meyendorff, *Byzantine Hesychasm*; Sinkewicz, "Christian Theology and the Renewal of Philosophical and Scientific Studies".

¹⁹ Hesychasm stems from the Greek word *hesychia* 'quietness', 'peace of mind', 'silence', 'tranquillity'. For a good summary, cf. Russel, "The Hesychast Controversy". In-depth studies: Meyendorff, *Byzantine Hesychasm*; Rigo, *Monaci esicasti e monaci bogomili*.

proclaimed the official doctrine of the Orthodox Church of Constantinople. The theological controversy resolved in the Council of Constantinople in 1351 had developed throughout the first half of the fourteenth century. The concerns proved influential also in the approach to sciences and put an end to a complex period of intellectual controversies that shaped the intellectual humus Bessarion found at his arrival in Constantinople. The conflict started when the Greek monk from southern Italy Barlaam of Seminara (ca. 1290-1348) disputed with Palamas on the possibility of experiencing God by the hesychast monks. Palamas and Barlaam are crucial for an understanding of the consequences for astronomical studies after the decisions taken by Byzantine Orthodox authorities on the question of the *Filioque* at the Council of 1351.²⁰ That convention sanctioned the theological doctrine of Palamas on 'divine substance' and 'energies' as official for the Orthodox Church, thus irredeemably widening the divide between the Eastern and Western Churches.²¹ The resolution of the theological controversy was a socio-historical turning point involving political factions of Byzantine society, namely the triumph of the hesychasts in their struggle for hegemony in the official Byzantine culture, splitting political and intellectual environments into *pro* and *contra* hesychasm. The debates on hesychasm coincided with the discussion whether ascetic practice and prayer are superior to natural knowledge and whether the latter is worth being pursued and to what extent.²² The political success of pro-hesychasts resulted in an irreversible, negative view on what pertains to the inquiry into nature and the heavens as an access to the divine.

With regard to astronomical studies, traditionally considered a useful tool to achieve contemplation of God, the question dealt with which properties of the heavens and the celestial bodies allowed one to reach the contemplative state. The official hesychast and Palamite positions were expressed by Theodorus Meliteniotes (ca. 1320-1393),²³ Professor and Head of the Patriarchal School, in a work composed around 1352, *Three Books on Astronomy*: knowledge of the stars, according to him, had a subaltern role as *ancilla fidei*. It was permitted to study astronomy merely to learn how to compute celestial positions and eclipses, thus to investigate the motion of the planets by mathematical means. This guaranteed a high degree of certainty, but nothing rational could derive from investigation of the physical properties. Moreover, examining heavenly realms as causes of human affairs (that is astrology) was banned from the official curriculum as an activity that prevented the soul from achieving salvation. Although astrological works continued to be circulated they came to be seen as suspicious and unorthodox.

Radical hesychast positions claimed that one had to devote oneself to asceticism and reject other kinds of knowledge, for they do not lead to salvation and easily provide erroneous knowledge due to their unstable premises. Therefore, scholars looked for arguments to acknowledge the usefulness of secular knowledge. In the case of astronomy, Meliteniotes argued that

²⁰ Demetracopoulos, "Barlaam of Calabria". See the bibliography mentioned there.

²¹ Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*; Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy*.

²² Nicolaidis, *Science and Eastern Orthodoxy*, 93-117.

²³ Tihon, "Meliteniotes, Theodore".

secular knowledge was useful inasmuch as it provided knowledge obtained through pure mathematics about the abstract properties of celestial bodies.

This approach was the outcome of a long debate between attempts to ban astrology from licit knowledge and attempts to defend it on the basis of Neoplatonic philosophy combined with Christian doctrine, such as the anonymous dialogue *Hermippus (On Astrology)*.²⁴ Dating from the fourteenth century but perhaps composed earlier, it is a treatise on the beauty of astrology more than a defence against criticism, since it touches on all the possibilities granted to those who want to study astrology. The book explains the nature of the planets (which are endowed with souls) and the effects of their conjunctions on the world and human affairs, the nature of the human soul and its parts, and how they influence our decisions. The author even employed Neoplatonic concepts to describe the nature of Christian concepts, such as the Holy Trinity:

I will plainly explain what's left, that is: reason (λόγος) is the vehicle of the intellect, the soul is the vehicle of reason, and the spirit is the vehicle of the soul. [...] For this reason, when we are successfully and appropriately inspired – if we observe properly – we worship the three hypostases in God and the mystery of the triad [i.e. trinity] from which life begins and was revealed to us. That which is the intellect in us is the father in them [the hypostases], reason is the son, the soul is the [holy] spirit, and by them the spirit is uncreated and life-generating.²⁵

What is striking is that the author claimed that astrology was necessary to achieve contemplation of God, implying that Scriptures, prayers, and ascetic practices alone would not be enough, something that prompted the strongest hesychast opposition.²⁶

Bessarion's education was influenced by the outcomes of this climate of tension between ascetism and astrology. His astronomical education will be dealt with further, and in more detail, below (see chapter 2).

3 Mistra

Unlike the general state of confusion in the remnants of the Byzantine Empire from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, the city of Mistra in the Peloponnese enjoyed a time of relative prosperity.²⁷ It was founded by Franks who devastated Constantinople in 1204. Located not far from the ancient Sparta, Mistra was conceived as a strategic point in warfare, not as a trading centre as Trebizond or Thessaloniki or Constantinople. Despite

²⁴ The Greek text is edited in Kroll and Viereck, *Anonymi Christiani Hermippus De Astrologia Dialogus*. I am currently working on the English translation. There are two candidates for the text's authorship: John Catrarios and Nikephoros Gregoras, both of whom were active as scribes and composers of astronomical texts in fourteenth-century Byzantium. Cf. Jürss, *Studien zum spätbyzantinischen Dialog Hermippus De astrologia*. My study on *Hermippus* is reprised from my previous article: Bardi, "Hybrid Knowledge and the Historiography of Science".

²⁵ Author's translation; original text in Kroll, Viereck, *Anonymi Christiani Hermippus De Astrologia Dialogus*, 21.

²⁶ Magdalino, *L'Orthodoxie des astrologues*, 154-7.

²⁷ Runciman, *Lost Capital of Byzantium*.

its non-Byzantine origins, it soon became the cradle of the rediscovery of Greek philosophy and the birth of Hellenic independence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In a similar manner to Trebizond, it became a cosmopolitan city and attracted not only Byzantines but also Franks, Catalans, Jews, Venetians, Genoese, and Florentines.

These encounters resulted in a climate of intellectual flourish: Mistra became a paradise for scholars, especially those seeking intellectual freedom, which was not guaranteed by the hesychast orthodoxy in Constantinople. Mistra, as an intellectual hub opposed to the capital Constantinople, has been effectively described by Niketas Siniossoglou: “The intellectual circle of Mistra was largely formed as a collateral result of the hegemony of Palamism in the main theological and political centres. Mistra provided shelter to intellectuals and *litterati* forced by circumstances to leave Constantinople and Thessaloniki”.²⁸

Mistra reached its cultural apex due to the polymath Georgios Gemistos Plethon, the most renowned exponent of the intellectual milieu produced there.²⁹ He was Bessarion’s teacher after he arrived.

Plethon was born in the 1360s and, like other eminent personalities of Mistra, was a descendant of an aristocratic family and was educated in Constantinople. He spent several years in Adrianople, the European capital of the Ottoman Sultanate, but then settled in the Peloponnese after 1409. Plethon’s philosophy was quite eclectic, merging elements stemming from Platonism, Zoroastrianism, Chaldean Oracles, Kabalistic thought, Christianity, and Islam. He likely developed this unique background in Adrianople, where he studied under the Jewish philosopher Eliseaeus, who was acquainted with Kabala, Zoroastrianism, and the Aristotelianism interpreted by Ibn-Rushd (or Averroes).

Plethon’s move to Mistra was likely due to his expressions of non-Orthodox views, e.g. sympathies with Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Judaism, when he resided in Constantinople.³⁰ Even the Emperor of Byzantium, Manuel Palaeologus, recognised that his position was not in accordance with the hesychast-Palamite Church of Constantinople. Nevertheless, the Emperor acknowledged Plethon’s exceptional intellectual talents and decided to send him to Mistra, where the Emperor had placed his son, Theodorus II, in charge of the despotate of the city. Plethon eventually found an ideal intellectual environment in Mistra. In that context, his philosophical inquiry led him to establish an original and innovative plan of political reform. In particular, he claimed that the decadence of the Byzantine Empire was due to lack of acknowledgment of the intellectual and historical heritage of the Greek civilisation. Thus, his political agenda promoted a rebirth of Greek knowledge alongside Greek myths and divinities, as opposed to Constantinople and Rome. The essential part of this agenda was to re-read the ancient classics. This aspect of re-reading classical sources makes him a figure anticipating the subsequent age of humanism.³¹ Some scholars saw in

²⁸ Siniossoglou, *Radical Platonism in Byzantium*, 122. Although a contested book, which generated some controversy (which I do not summarise here), I believe it is a valuable publication worthy of being consulted.

²⁹ Masai, *Pletone e il platonismo di Mistra*; Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon*; Hladký, *The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon*.

³⁰ Masai, *Pletone e il platonismo*, 55-65.

³¹ Garin, *Lo zodiaco della vita*, 65-8; Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science*, 36-8.

Plethon the precursor of Spinoza because of his reading of philosophical and historical sources with the lenses of a proto-historical-critical method; this method avoided the interpretation of Scriptures offered by rabbinical or ecclesiastic official institutions and, instead, employed what was later called *lumen naturale*. At any rate, Plethon's religious views were shaped by a rationalist spirit.³²

Through his re-reading of Greek, Christian and Jewish traditions, Plethon strove to achieve metaphysical and moral reforms; therefore, he focused on reforming principles of philosophy and politics. Not accidentally, Plethon frequently dealt with the topic of principles in philosophy and mathematics (see chapter 2).

Plethon was the exponent of a long-standing tradition of Byzantine polymaths who had cultivated, at least from the eleventh century, a wide range of disciplines and attempted to reconcile Platonic philosophy with Christian doctrine, following the example of Michael Psellos (1018-1081).³³

Plethon's theory of knowledge depended on the principle of causality (*ex uno unum*) and generated determinist views of reality, with no difference between spiritual and material beings. Human behaviour and divine behaviour were to be considered a rational chain of causes-effects, where one could know determined effects from determined causes. That is why astrology played a most significant role in Plethon's philosophy: astrology was the science that guaranteed knowledge of the chain of causes between God and humanity, the whole knowledge of everything. As Plethon's determinism took inspiration from non-Christian sources, such as Greek philosophers, Kabalistic thoughts and Islam, his dealing with pagan texts was not well received by the Church of Constantinople. However, his unorthodox methods were at least tolerated in Mistra.

One of Plethon's major works, *Laws*, was burnt as heretical by the Orthodox censorship of the Constantinopolitan Patriarch Gennadius Scholarios, although it has survived in fragments.³⁴ Moreover, Byzantium was conquered by the Ottomans and the Hellenistic legacies were not resurrected as he had expected. Nonetheless, Plethon's rationalistic spirit is traceable in the early modern developments of science and interpretations of texts free from religious censorship. Notably, his presence at the time of the Council of Florence was influential for the birth of Neoplatonic circles of the city.³⁵ Marsilio Ficino published his translation of the *Enneads* of Plotinus and named Plethon as "the second Plato". It was in Plethon's honour that Cosimo de' Medici founded the Academy at Florence.

In 1465, a Venetian army under the command of Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta of Rimini entered Mistra. Sigismondo took with him the body of Plethon and placed it in a noble sepulcher in Rimini, where the inscription reads: "The greatest philosopher of his time". The spirit of Plethon shaped the cultural and intellectual climate that Bessarion found in Mistra.

³² Siniosoglou, *Radical Platonism*, 418-26.

³³ Siniosoglou, *Radical Platonism*, 49-92. On Psellos, cf. Barber, Jenkins, *Reading Michael Psellos*; Lauritzen, "L'ortodossia neoplatonica di Psello"; Kaldellis, Polemis, *Psellos and the Patriarchs*; Moore, *Iter Psellianum*; Jeffreys, Lauxtermann (eds), *The Letters of Psellos*; Lauritzen, *Bibliography - Michael Psellos, 2000-2020*.

³⁴ George Gemistos Plethon, *Traité des lois ou recueil des fragments*.

³⁵ Garin, *Lo zodiaco della vita*, 63-92.

4 Bessarion and the Influence of Trebizond, Constantinople, and Mistra

Bessarion first experienced a multicultural context in his native city of Trebizond, and after that the context of two opposed poles, i.e. the radical hesychast Constantinople and the anti-hesychast, rationalistic Mistra. Especially in the latter city, thanks to Plethon, Bessarion turned his attention to the astronomical sciences as a tool to explore divine realms and the relations between heavens and earth; he did not disdain investigation of the physical properties of the celestial bodies, which could shed light on their influence in human realms. This view would later be reflected in Bessarion's patronage of astronomy in Italy (see chapter 3).

From Trebizond, Bessarion absorbed a Byzantine heritage which had happily integrated oriental influences, notably Arabic and Persian cultures, as well as Islamic astronomy from the Mongols. In Constantinople, he encountered the post-hesychasm phase, where this movement had hegemonised institutional education. Bessarion attended the Patriarchal school of Constantinople but then moved to Mistra and absorbed non-orthodox ideas of necessity, causalism, determinism, and reform of the whole society promoted by Plethon. Remarkably, the philosophy one could develop in Mistra did not view inquiry into the domains of natural philosophy with suspicion. This aspect is essential to understand Bessarion's later efforts to foster astronomical studies in Italy.

In sum, Trebizond, Constantinople and Mistra (and the peculiarities of their intellectual environments) were the three key factors of Bessarion's formation. In his youth, Bessarion could experience opposite poles concerning philosophy and science. Trebizond and Mistra were rather 'open-minded' and tolerant compared to the radicalism of Constantinople. All of this influenced Bessarion's choices in preserving astronomical manuscripts (see chapter 4).

Two main periods shaped Bessarion's life. The years in the area of the late Byzantine Empire, as an Orthodox Christian, and the expatriation to Italy after 1438 and his conversion to Catholicism. What follows is arranged accordingly. Chapter 2 is devoted to Bessarion's astronomical apprenticeship in Constantinople and Mistra, while chapter 3 deals with his Italian period.

