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### THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BYZANTINE PRESENCE IN ITALY

The sea is often seen as an element separating the peoples and civilisations that exist on its sides. This may have been true, when talking about oceans which were difficult to cross; It is not any more true, as the existence of such alliances as NATO and SEATO can prove. In fact, a sea that can be crossed with relative ease, works as a medium bringing together the coastal populations much more than separating them. And this “bringing together” may mean friendly or unfriendly togetherness.

The Ionian and the Adriatic Sea have always been easy to cross, bringing thus Italy close to the Balkans - then and now. Traffic between the two sides went on uninterruptedly and faced difficulties only for political or for security reasons. It is characteristic that the Romans felt the need to build two major roads, the Via Appia from Rome to Brindisi on the southeast side of the Italian peninsula, and the Via Egnatia, which started at Dyrrachion, on the Balkan side of the Adriatic and went all the way to the region of the Straits, where Constantinople was to be founded some centuries later. A large highway connecting Rome to Asia – and, later, to the New Rome.

There was also substantial migration going on from one side to the other of the Adriatic, usually from the poor east to the fertile west. Since Antiquity, Greek colonies sprang all over the coastline of southern Italy and Sicily and the region was called Magna Graecia. There is no doubt that with time these early hellenic populations have been largely assimilated, especially after the Roman conquest. But still they constituted a substantial demographic basis on which the Greek-speaking Byzantine domination will seat its power, when the Italian peninsula will be stormed by the barbarians. This Greek tradition and demographic presence in the south is one element that one should keep in mind when trying to understand Byzantine Italy.

The second element of importance, is the creation of Constantinople, inaugurated in 330, as the New Rome, the capital of the Roman empire in the East. Initially, this was meant to be an attempt to decentralize and to install the

administration at a strategically incomparable position, close to the economically developed parts of the Roman empire. And the two emperors, of the East and of the West, were supposed to reign together. But soon antagonisms appeared, starting with the Church hierarchy, in which the patriarch of Constantinople claimed an elevated position not easily acceptable to the pope of Rome. The abolition of the Western empire in 476 by the Herulian Odoacer left the *basileus* of Constantinople as sole successor to the Roman emperors. Then Northern Italy passed to the Ostrogoths, while important efforts were deployed by the authorities of Constantinople in order to keep control of the South. At last, in the VIth century, Justinian the Great, after long and painful wars, reconquered the whole of Italy and attached it to the empire.

This we will consider as the beginnings of Byzantine Italy. Justinian was inspired by the dream of the world empire of Rome, but in fact he installed for the first time proper Byzantine authorities and introduced the Eastern mentality to the peninsula. But as is normal, one must allow for quite some years before one can really speak of a plainly Byzantine province in Italy – in fact, Italy was never hellenized.

A third element is that for Byzantium there was not much of a patriotic ideology. What was important, was imperial authority and, above all, order that distinguished the civilized from the uncivilized. This is how Constantine Porphyrogenitus, a tenth century emperor spoke about the issue:

“By this praiseworthy order, imperial power appears better ordered and proceeds to better behaviour and thereby is more admirable to foreigners and to our own people. When the description and outline of imperial ritual is overlooked and so to speak perishing, it is really possible to see the empire unadorned and ugly... But when the imperial power is carried along in measure and good order, it would represent the Creator’s harmony and activity concerning the whole universe and it would seem more dignified to the subjects and therefore more pleasing and admirable...”

This is a rather cold approach to the State and the emperor, that speaks to reason but not to feeling. The absence of sentimental involvement in politics is one characteristic of Byzantium and sometimes contrasts with the violent positions that individuals have taken on religious matters. But even here nuances are necessary, since involvement was not universal.

The period we are going to consider starts with the VIth c. and ends with the XIth.: in 1071, the last Byzantine authorities have been expelled from the city of Bari, leaving Southern Italy and Sicily under the power of the Normans

– a new power openly antagonistic to the Byzantines. But the Greek populations had remained under this new regime, which was deeply influenced by its Byzantine predecessors. Byzantium survived in Magna Graecia for quite some centuries after 1071.

It is interesting to realize that in the first period, from the VIth to the mid-VIIIth c., Byzantine Italy was clearly divided into two parts with notable differences. The administrative center was at the north, in Ravenna, seat of the plenipotentiary governor sent by the emperor and called the exarch. This was a latin-speaking milieu, where Greek was hardly known although much respected as the language of the capital. In the Ravenna papyri of the VIIth and VIIIth c. we find several signatures written in Greek script but in Latin language – obviously the work of Latin speakers who wanted to use a “noble” alphabet or who just did not know to write in Latin. The tradition of the bilingual Roman empire was still alive here, and latin was prevailing. The Byzantine exarch of Ravenna was trying to apply imperial policies in the west, not without trouble, especially since the pontifical power, centered in Rome, was increasing and provoking locally inspired reactions that were not always easy to control. The exarch was able to arrest and send to exile pope Martin in 653, because he opposed the religious policies of Constantinople; but forty years later, another Byzantine imperial emissary was unable to arrest pope Sergius, because his own militia revolted against him. It became clear that imperial authority in northern Italy was shaky.

In the south, things were different. Greek was much more spoken and in some regions, in Sicily and Calabria, it could become predominant, especially after continued migration from the Peloponnesos. Emperor Constans II, before his death in 668, had even tried to transfer the imperial capital in Syracuse of Sicily (and not in Rome or Ravenna), in the hope that from there he would better control Northern Italy while being in a more secure environment. But this attempt remained without consequence. Sicily was soon to be organized as a *thema*, a military-administrative unit like those that existed in Asia Minor and the Balkans. Thus, while the North remained in outdated administrative forms, modern institutions appeared in the South, which was thus aligned on the rest of the empire.

Migration from the Balkans towards Italy and Sicily was enhanced by historical events. The Slavic onslaught forced many Greeks – in some cases, whole towns, such as Patras – to see temporarily refuge in Italy. Also, the theological quarrel known as iconoclasm, that is the prohibition of the cult of the icons, that broke in the early VIIIth c., pushed many opponents of the

iconoclastic dogma, that was official in the east, to flee to Italy and Sicily, where pressure was lesser. In the VIIIth c., we have a real wave of migration towards the Italian peninsula that reinforced the native Gree element.

Iconoclasm also brought the relations between the Pope, who rejected it altogether, and Constantinople, to the breaking point. So, while northern Italy was being lost for Byzantium with the fall of Ravenna to the Lombards (751), the south, together with the rest of the Illyrikon, i.e. the western part of the Balkans including Thessalonica, was taken by the emperor from the jurisdiction of the Pope and was attached to the patriarchate of Constantinople. This meant the definite disappearance of Lain from the Balkans (it was still spoken in Thessalonica by the end of the VIIth c.) and the increased hellenization of Southern Italy and Sicily.

It is interesting to note that this transfer from one jurisdiction to the other did not meet any opposition from the populations concerned. It is obvious that the partly hellenized populations of the South felt at home with the Constantinopolitan hierarchy as they did with the Roman one: both were familiar to them and both wre a little foreign. The acceptance of the new hierarchy by the south Italian churches is even more remarkable, as we know that in these regions iconoclasm never was predominant and that they served for long as a refuge for persecuted iconodoule monks.

Thus, southern Italy and Sicily appear as a region inbetween two traditions, related to both and distant from both. The people accepted their lords, but they did not go to extremes to defend them; they were ready to accept the other, if necessary. They were even ready to accept a third party, if this could guarantee good and secure life. This happened in the IXth century with the arrival of the Arabs.

The appearance and expansion of Islam is one very important phaenomenon in Mediaeval history -and a very spectacular one. In less than one century from the beginnings of the new religion, the islamic armies had conquered all Northern Africa, had besieged twice, albeit unsuccessfully, Constantinople, and had taken a strong hold on European soil, in the Iberian peninsula. In the early IXth c. their offensive developed in the central Mediterranean: with important and well organized amphibious operations, the Arabs landed on Crete and on Sicily and some decades later became masters of both islands. In Sicily the conquest started from the less hellenized part, in the west, with the capture of Palermo. It is probable that the new conquerors took advantage of a latent hostility between the autochthone populations and the Byzantine administration. Be that as it may, Sicily became

Arab and Muslim, a new language and a new religion came to be added to the preexisting, but nothing seems to have changed in the people's everyday life. The three communities, speaking Latin, Greek and Arabic, lived side by side without any major frictions. It was as if the wars, including the all pervasive war of religion, the *djihad*, were happening above their heads and did not touch them -except when they came home with all their ugliness, and had to be weathered away.

The Byzantines retreated in Calabria, also heavily hellenized. Moreover, in 867, the empire occupied the city of Bari, that was going to become the capital of the Byzantine province of Longobardia - in a region where the Lombard Latin speaking element was preponderant and less ready to accept the imperial governors. But the Byzantine positions were thus strengthened and Byzantium became once more a major Italian power, able to dictate the law to the various minor princes of the peninsula, as its alliances went up until Naples. The Italian south more or less hellenized, was being aggregated around a Greek speaking central authority, while the north, occupied by the Franks, who guaranteed the pontifical independence, went even more away from Byzantium.

In the south, a long war of attrition started, with the Arabs mostly on the offensive. The Lives of Saints describe vividly this almost ritual exchange of raids, that created much suffering but on small scale. Saint Nilos, the founder of the monastery of Grottaferrata, who wandered around southern Italy in his youth provoking hostile reactions on the part of the inhabitants who took him to be a spy, had to face such raiding parties of Sicilian Arabs.

On the other hand, the countryside developed. Agriculture was prosperous and, most importantly, mulberry trees were grown in order to ensure a major production of silk. In the North, a new power, the Saxon empire made its appearance - and this was very antagonistic to Byzantium, that could by no means accept the idea that a second emperor, and of the Romans at that, could exist on earth. The trip of Liutprand, bishop of Cremona, to Constantinople, as an ambassador of emperor Otto I to Nikephoros Phokas, gave this learned bishop the opportunity to describe vividly several aspects of this political antagonism. When an embassy from the Pope came to Constantinople in 968 with a letter asking Nicephorus, "the emperor of the Greeks" to conclude an alliance with Otto "august emperor of the Romans", the Byzantines were outraged: they abused the sea, cursed the waves, and wondered how they could have transported such an iniquity, and why the deep had not opened to swallow the ship. "The audacity of it, they

cried, to call the universal emperor of the Romans, the one and only Nicephorus, "emperor of the Greeks" and to style a poor barbaric creature, i.e. Otto I, "emperor of the Romans". The Byzantines were very proud of their Roman past and were not disposed to share it with anyone.

This was big politics. There were also the small politics, the regional problems, created by local lords who tried to survive as separate entities between the three major powers present in Italy. All three tried to keep them at check by using them against one another. In 935, Emperor Romanus Lecapenus had to face such a rebellion. He sent to Italy reinforcements (some 1500 cavalry, which was not negligible) but more importantly nesent gifts, of which we have a detailed list: 7200 gold coins, 20 precious silk dresses, some utensils and some perfume. With this he managed to turn the king of Italy against the reberllious lords and forced them to surrender to the Byzantine governor of Longobardia. One may be sure that practices like this one were common. They show that the Italian populations had no real attachment to the emperor. They tried to play their own game but, knowing their limits, were ready to settle with the one who gave most. If the approach to politics was cynical from the point of view of the great powers, it seems to have been even more cynical from the point of view of the small lords. As long as the population was concerned, it obviously tried to survive and in any case it did not seem to have been motivated by any kind of patriotism or particular attachment to the empire.

In the context of a major administrative reform, Byzantine Italy, which was up to then divided into three provinces or themes, Sicily, Calabria and Longobardia (and later, Lucania), was placed in the Xth century under the general command of a *katepano*, the commander of the heavy cavalry that was then becoming fashionable as a central piece in all strategic planning, that had to be supported by numerous infantry. The *katepano*, whose name is at the origin of the term *capitaneus*, "captain", and of the province called now *Capitanata*, had to hire mercenaries wherever he could find them, mostly in western Europe, in order to fight his enemies, who also hired mercenaries at the same source. It is interesting to see that the elite units of the armies that confronted each other in Italy, came from the same stock, and some of them even changed sides with time in the same way as professional athletes change teams in our days. On the other hand, Byzantium, in order to ensure some support at the grassroot level, had to import to Italy foot soldiers from the east, including many Armenians, whose signatures start appearing at the bottom of contracts in the late Xth c.

What was the local participation to the war effort of the empire? Minimal. The population, Greek speakers and Latin speakers participated only occasionally at the military, mainly as a militia in the service of local lords. They do not seem to participate at any major effort on any side. They pay their taxes and watch the others fight.

On the other hand, the cultural life of this local population was very intense. Greek manuscript copying activity in Southern Italy and Sicily was a major occupation and the number of products of these scriptoria that survived to us is very impressive. Also monastic life was very active and will remain so for several centuries, giving birth to art and literature that is purely Byzantine in conception and technique. And one has the impression that this is not the result of imports -it is rather the result of an art and literature that developed in parallel with that of Byzantium, with some local characteristics, more or less in the same way as this would have happened in other provinces of the empire exposed to foreign influence.

Byzantium has tried seriously twice to reconquer Sicily. Once in the Xth century, under Nikephoros Phokas, when a major fleet and expeditionary force was sent from Constantinople to Italy and joined the local forces in a major operation that failed completely. Even the Byzantine admiral was taken prisoner, and later spent some years in captivity in Mehdia of Africa, where, to kill time, he copied manuscripts with the sermons of St John Chrysostomos.

The second attempt, in the early 1040ies, almost succeeded. The Byzantine general George Maniakes, at the head of Frank and Russian mercenaries, managed to reconquer the eastern part of the island with Messina and Syracuse. But he was suspected by the authorities of Constantinople and was almost forced to revolt against the emperor. A hero as he was, he marched against Constantinople with his troops, that were composed of western mercenaries. He was killed and his movement disperced.

What is interesting in both cases, is that the operations were conducted by soldiers coming from abroad. There must have been some local participation, but it is not mentioned in our sources so we can surmise that it was insignificant.

There is more. Hellenophone and latinophone christian popupations had survived in large numbers in Muslim Sicily. We have metnioned how these populations have maintained their cultural lins with the motherland. Yet, in all these operations there is no mention of any anti-Arab revolt that would have manifested itself at the arrival of the Christian army, not even after its victory.

Neither did the Sicilian population fight valiantly to defend the muslim regime. Here again, one has the impression that war and its result did not really concern the local populations.

The apathy of the populations might explain one phenomenon that is practically unique in southern Italy and Sicily, the creation of the Norman state in the XIth c.

The Normans, who lived in French Normandy since the IXth/early Xth c., were reputed to be exquisite warriors, especially as a heavy cavalry able to break any lines with its charges. Around the year 1000 they started being hired as mercenaries by the Byzantine authorities of Italy, and they were so efficient, that the Arabs also started hiring them in their own army. In a context of political instability and acute antagonisms between the empires, papacy, the Arabs, and a multitude of local lords, the mercenaries started taking over castles and forming their own principalities. They united, managed to beat the traditional powers and ended up by taking their place. In 1071, the Normans took Bari, the last Byzantine stronghold in southern Italy; in 1072 they took Palermo and put an end to the Muslim state of Sicily. What in the past had initially been Byzantine south Italy and Sicily, then was shared between Byzantines and the Arabs, was now reunited under the Norman scepter.

The new power that emerged had one ambition, to expand to the east and conquer Byzantium. In 1081, the Normans landed in Durazzo, in Albania, and were repelled after much trouble, and only thanks to the support of the Venetian fleet that the Byzantines obtained. They still created problems to Byzantium with the crusades; in 1147, the Norman fleet devastated Central Greece and Peloponnesos and carried off many Byzantine silk weavers to Sicily; and in 1185, after another landing in Durazzo, the Normans managed to conquer and pillage Thessalonica. This was a power definitely hostile to Byzantium.

Yet, inside the Norman state, the Greek element was omnipresent and very manifest. In spite of the schism of the Churches (1054), Gree religious life continued to thrive in Italy and Sicily. Many top administrators were Greeks and were closely related to the Byzantine tradition - some were even former Byzantine officials. Large sectors of the state were run by Greeks. I think, for example, of admiral Christodoulos, who was granted the title of protonobelissimos by emperor Alexius Comnenus; or admiral George of Antioch, the founder of the church of la Martorana in Palermo, with its superb mosaics. In mid- 12th c. the art that the admiral has chosen was completely Byzantine, as did the patron of the famous capella palatina in the same city. It



has been remarked that the choice and the position of scenes of the surviving mosaics in both churches, were affected by Byzantine rhetorical conventions, familiar from homilies, may be the ones of Philagathos Kerameus.

The art that prevailed in Norman Sicily was deeply influenced - in fact, a continuation- of Byzantine art, with substantial influence from the Arabs. But the latter, being mainly aniconic as far as religious topics were concerned, remained, in the margin.

The Byzantine presence is also very obvious in the literary production of the Norman state. That Greek was a largely spoken language is obvious from the many Greek documents -deeds of sale, of donation, wills, etc.- that have survived in Sicilian archives until the 13th century. Greek survived together with Arabic and Latin, the latter one being on the rise for obvious reasons. But the high brow literature of Sicily was mainly Byzantine. Two examples would suffice.

1. Philagathos Kerameus was born probably under Byzantine regime, and became monk of the monastery of Rossano, where he died in the mid-12th century. He is the author of a so-called Italo-Greek homiliary, i.e. a collection of sermons in Greek based on patristic tradition as well as on classical authors. He was a monk of an absolutely new type. He also wrote commentary to ancient or oriental novels such as the *Aithiopika* of Heliodoros, trying to interpret them as Christian allegories. His writings constitute an integral part of Byzantine literary tradition, while in fact being the work of a man who never put his feet in the Eastern empire. He may be seen as a model for the Italo-Greek monk of the Sicilian kingdom. In his time, Greek was sufficient to be written on its own merits. Things will change with time, as this appears from the following example.

2. Eugenius of Palermo (ca 1130-ca 1203) was a layman, a high-ranking official at the court of Palermo, who also became an admiral. He distinguished himself as a translator and as a poet. He translated Ptolemy's works from Arabic into Latin, and the Sibylline oracles from Greek into Latin. He published one version of the novel *Stephanites and Ichnelates* in Greek. He wrote many poems, in classical Greek language and metrics. He was interested in the instability of human life and in human behaviour, that he treated on the basis of Greek classical and patristic tradition.

It is clear that his language and culture was mainly Greek, and in this language he wrote whatever he did for his pleasure and to show off. But he was also a cosmopolitan and felt the need to help the other citizens of Palermo by translating into their language (i.e. Latin) texts that were not easily accessible to them.

Cultural affinity between Palermo and Constantinople has remained active for quite some time. Traffic of books and scribes from Constantinople to southern Italy and Sicily is well attested in the XIIth century. Many Basileian monks, i.e. monks of Greek rite, travelled to Constantinople in order to acquire books: for example Bartholomaios of Simeri, the founder of Rossano and Luke the first abbot of the Monastery of the Saviour in Messina, both did their shopping in Constantinople and even attracted and hired well educated calligraphers in order to make copies of the Greek books on the spot; similar shopping did Sabas, the founder of the Saviour at Bordonaro and Nektarios of Otranto. Other books came to the Norman court as imperial gifts to the Norman rulers. All this information, based on narrative sources, is now supported by recent codicological studies. Many codices of the library of the Saviour in Messina come from oriental libraries. In a Norman Sicily open to the Byzantine influence, this flow of books could result from the wealth of the Basileian institutions as well as from the nostalgia of the Italiotic population for its Byzantine past.

This attachment to Byzantium may have changed after 1155. At that year, emperor Manuel Comnenus attempted the reconquest of Italy. The Byzantines landed to Ancona and with the help of rebel Norman lords – and with some help of Grek population and church – they managed to reestablish imperial sovereignty on most of the territories between Ancona and Taranto. In spite of its initial success, the operation ended in a failure, as it created a vast antibyzantine alliance and obliged the troops of Constantinople to abandon Italy two years later. After that, the Norman authorities became much more sceptical about supporting the contacts of their own Greek speakers with Constantinople. This may have been an important change in trend, but nothing changed immediately, because contacts between the Bosphorus and southern Italy was not only the business of Greeks.

Many were the Latins, especially, Normans, who stayed in Constantinople, initially as military leaders, who later penetrated the Byzantine aristocracy; some even married in the imperial family. But other South Italians also lived in Constantinople and were participating to all arts and crafts, including copying of Greek manuscripts. Thus, Byzantine influence in Norman territory was also supported by the contacts of Normans with Constantinople. What brought things to the final breaking point, was the abolition of the Norman monarchy by the German emperor Henry the VIth (1194) and, even more, the fall of Constantinople to the Crusaders in 1204. The conditions had then changed completely. The Italiotic Hellenism remained

alone on its way to the inevitable assimilation, that started with the ecclesiastical submission to Rome. But still one must not forget that a major figure in 14th century theological discussions in Constantinople was Barlaam of Calabria, the man who unsuccessfully opposed the excesses of the hesychastic doctrine. He represented the logical approach to religion and opposed the oriental mysticism that was then preached by his adversaries.

The Greek presence in southern Italy and Sicily had roots that went a long way back in time. It has always been secondary to the overwhelming presence of the autochthonous populations. But it was important for its qualitative contribution. It was a major bridge that united East and West. The new culture that sprang in the Italian *Mezzogiorno* favoured the exchange of trends and ideas, the same trends and ideas that will prepare the way to humanism and, ultimately, to the renaissance.

There is also a second aspect that I tried to stress in my paper and which appears interesting to me. Italiotic Hellenism has heavily contributed to the creation of the cosmopolitan milieu that I tried to describe – a milieu that lived above (or, may-be, below) the constraints of language, religion or political affiliation. Southern Italy in the Middle Ages could be seen as a really international region, with many peoples and languages and religions, living and thriving next to each other, under the one or the other political authority each keeping its own characteristics and enriching the community with its own tradition, culture and specificities. Moreover, these people were interested, beyond survival, to the quality of life that individual traditions would provide and left aside – if not completely ignored – the inevitable participation to political life and its partisan involvements.

One might say that Philagathos Kerameus or George of Antioch and their contemporaries, were some kind of early Europeans if not citizens of the world.