
ELEFThERIOS DESPOTAKIS, John Plousiadenos (1423?–1500): A Time-Space Geography of his Life and Career (*Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 284; *Bibliothèque de Byzantion* 21). Leuven – Paris – Bristol: Peeters 2020. 222 pp. – ISBN: 978-90-429-3787-1 (€ 90).

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In the first volume of his *Theologia dogmatica christianorum orientalium ab ecclesia catholica dissidentium* (5 vols., 1926–1935), the Assumptionist and Byzantinist MARTIN JUGIE numbered among the ranks of the “theologi antipalmitae et latinophrones” one “Joseph, bishop of Methone,” alias John Plousiadenos. JUGIE noted that John Plousiadenos was a Cretan, “archpriest” of his native land before he was a bishop, an advocate of the Council of Florence, a creature of the Cardinal Bessarion, and that he died sometime after 1498. Beyond this basic profile, JUGIE noted that five of Plousiadenos’ treatises had been published, among which a *Dialogus de differentiis inter Graecos et Latinos et de sacrosancta synodo Florentina* (PG 159) – a work “written with remarkable liveliness, and a thorough pleasure to read” (*mira vivacitate scriptus est, lectuque perjucundus*).¹

It is not common to encounter such an encouraging statement regarding a text authored by a “Latin-minded” (*latinophron*) Byzantine, or (better) unionist. Those Greek theologians who renounced the schism and advocated communion with the Roman Church endeavored at great length, and sometimes great tedium, over abstruse theological questions such as the procession of the Holy Spirit *ab utroque* in order to convince their fellow Greeks – now their separated brethren – of the orthodoxy of the Latin Church and of themselves.² Despite JUGIE’s promising assessment of John Plousiadenos’ written work, his biography remained largely where

1. MARTIN JUGIE, *Theologia dogmatica christianorum orientalium ab ecclesia catholica dissidentium*, vol. 1, *Theologiae dogmaticae Graeco-russorum: Origo, historia, fontes*. Paris 1926, pp. 486–487.

2. For a more recent overview of unionist writings, see JOHN MONFASANI, *The Pro-Latin Apologetics of the Greek Emigres to Quattrocento Italy*. In: ANTONIO RIGO – PAVEL ERMILOV – MICHELE TRIZIO (eds), *Byzantine Theology and its Philosophical Background* (*Byzantioc: Studies in Byzantine History and Civilization* 4). Turnhout 2011, pp. 160–186.

that great Roman Catholic scholar had left it – a mere thumbnail sketch – until contributions by GEORG HOFMANN, S.J., MANUEL CANDAL, S.J., ZACHARIAS N. TSIRPANLES, and above all MANOUSSOS MANOUSSAKAS shed more light upon Plousiadenos’ writings, career, and contexts.³

Among these, the 1959 article of MANOUSSAKAS deserves special mention for providing the fullest account of John Plousiadenos’ career, though MANOUSSAKAS himself remained circumspect about what he set out to accomplish. Given that John Plousiadenos’ “vie offre pourtant encore plusieurs points obscurs,” MANOUSSAKAS indicated that his study, “loin de constituer une biographie complete de Plousiadénos, se propose modeste-ment de jeter un peu de lumière sur certains des ces points.”⁴

MANOUSSAKAS’ professed modesty, and the numerous lacunae in his account of Plousiadenos’ life, undoubtedly had to do with an apparent lack of primary source evidence. But MANOUSSAKAS’ account remained the best and fullest up to the present, receiving only minor adjustments and additions through the work of subsequent scholars.⁵ So the state of the life and career of John Plousiadenos has remained until the appearance of ELEFTHERIOS DESPOTAKIS’ monograph: a slim study of just over a hundred pages (not counting his five very substantial appendices, bibliography, and indices, which together constitute another hundred or so pages). But every single page of DESPOTAKIS’ study is packed with information, including the extensive footnotes, which shed bright light on the life, literary activity, social networks, and career of John Plousiadenos – whom DESPOTAKIS

3. GEORG HOFMANN, *Wie stand es mit der Frage der Kircheneinheit auf Kreta im XV. Jahrhundert?* OCP 10 (1944) pp. 91–115; MANUEL CANDAL, *La ‘Apologia’ del Plusiadenos a favor del Concilio de Florencia*. OCP 21 (1955) pp. 36–57; ZACHARIAS N. TSIRPANLES, *Ὁ Ἰωάννης Πλουσιαδηνὸς καὶ ἡ σιναϊτικὴ ἐκκλησία τοῦ Χριστοῦ Κεφαλαῖα στὸ Χάνδακα: Δύο ἀνέκδοτα βενετικὰ ἐγγράφα τοῦ 1481*. *Θησαυρίσματα* 3 (1964) pp. 1–28; ZACHARIAS N. TSIRPANLES, *Τὸ Κληροδότημα τοῦ καρδινάλιου Βησσαρίωνος γιὰ τοὺς φιλενωτικούς τῆς Βενετοκρατουμένης Κρήτης (1439–17ος αἰ.)* (Ἐπιστημονικὴ Ἐπετηρὶς Φιλοσοφικῆς Σχολῆς, παράρτημα 12). Thessaloniki 1967; MANOUSSOS MANOUSSAKAS, *Recherches sur la vie de Jean Plousiadénos (Joseph de Méthone) (1429?–1500)*. REByz 17 (1959) pp. 28–51.

4. MANOUSSAKAS, p. 28.

5. E.g., HENRI DOMINIQUE SAFFREY, *Pie II et les prêtres uniates en Crète au XVe siècle*. *Θησαυρίσματα* 16 (1979) pp. 39–53; KATERINA B. KORRE, *Η Μεθώνη του 1500 μέσα από τη δραστηριότητα του φιλενωτικού επισκόπου Ιωάννη Πλουσιαδηνού (1492–1500)*. In: GOGO VARZELIOTI – ANGELIKE PANOPOULOU (eds), *De Veneciis ad Mothonom: Ἐλληνες καὶ Βενετοὶ στη Μεθώνη τα χρόνια τῆς Βενετοκρατίας: Πρακτικὰ τῆς διεθνούς επιστημονικῆς συνάντησης, Μεθώνη 19–20 Μαρτίου 2010*. Athens 2012, pp. 127–152.

has indeed shown to be (to paraphrase DESPOTAKIS himself) outstanding among the Greek intellectuals who illumined the historical firmament between the last glimmers of Byzantium and the dawn of modernity.

The subtitle of DESPOTAKIS' monograph seems strange: "A Time-Space Geography of his Life and Career." Initially I puzzled over what special meaning could be signified by "Time-Space Geography." It seemed redundant. (Doesn't geography imply space, and as a study of the earth itself, doesn't it further imply the study of change over time?). I suspected something unnecessarily trendy here, and maybe some insecurity – given conventional scholarly reticence about the viability of the biographical genre as a mode of academic history, "geography" has been placed where "biography" might have been expected.⁶ Whatever the case may be, DESPOTAKIS does justice to the time and space inhabited by John Plousiadenos, first, through an introductory chapter (chapter 1, pp. 1–12) acquainting the reader with the situation of the island of Crete from the beginning of Venetian domination in the thirteenth century through the rocky reception of the union of Florence after 1439. This is necessary work for contextualizing Plousiadenos, though DESPOTAKIS is here mainly covering ground already trodden – see for instance the studies of GEORG HOFMANN, SILVANO BORSARI, and NICOLAOS B. TOMADAKIS.⁷

The following three chapters of the study take us through Plousiadenos' life, career, intellectual and scribal activities, and social networks. In chapter 2 (pp. 13–40), DESPOTAKIS immediately shows the inestimable value of the notarial documents of the Archivio di Stato di Venezia to the end of providing a surprisingly full picture of Plousiadenos' origins and family. For instance, DESPOTAKIS shows us that John's father, George, was married twice – both times to a woman named "Ergina"(!). It has long been known – at any rate since MANOUSSAKAS wrote his article in 1959 – that John had married before he received holy orders, but now DESPOTAKIS reveals the name of John's wife: Agnes Politi, whose name appears in a

6. Such doubts about the viability of biography as raised by R. G. COLLINGWOOD are referred to by DONALD BULLOUGH in his *Alcuin: Achievement and Reputation* (Education and Society in the Middle Ages and Renaissance 16). Leiden – Boston 2004, pp. xviii and 25.

7. HOFMANN, cited above; SILVANO BORSARI, *Il dominio veneziano a Creta nel XIII secolo* (Università di Napoli, Seminario di storia medioevale e moderna 1). Naples 1964; NICOLAOS B. TOMADAKIS, *La politica religiosa di Venezia a Creta verso i Cretesi Ortodossi dal XIII al XV secolo*. In: AGOSTINO PERTUSI (ed.), *Venezia e il Levante fino al secolo XV*, vol. 1.2, *Storia, diritto, economia*. Florence 1973, pp. 783–800.

notarial act of 1457 (“... Agneti Politi, uxori ser Iohannis Plussadino papatis”).⁸ As this act clearly shows, John Plousiadenos was a married priest, and it is from the earliest extant document attesting to Plousiadenos as priest (a deed from 1448), taken in conjunction with the prohibition issued by the Venetian Senate in 1360 against the ordination of Cretans younger than age 25, that DESPOTAKIS asserts Plousiadenos must have been born no later than 1423. DESPOTAKIS’ argument is convincing and thus undermines MANOUSSAKAS’ supposition that Plousiadenos was born around 1429 – a supposition based on Plousiadenos’ own claim (in his “lively” and “delightful” *Dialogue*) that he was “not yet ten years old” at the time of the Council of Florence. DESPOTAKIS plausibly interprets Plousiadenos’ claim as rhetoric devised to emphasize his own youth at the time of Florence – and so to exonerate himself of the charge that he had once opposed it.

In this same second chapter, DESPOTAKIS also traces out Plousiadenos’ earliest involvement in ventures to acquire financial backing for the beleaguered pro-union Greek clergy culminating in the “Bequest” engineered by the Cardinal Bessarion in 1462 and, once revised, put into effect in 1463. In chapter 3 (pp. 41–60), DESPOTAKIS lays out the substance of Plousiadenos’ bumpy ecclesiastical Crete as a beneficiary of Bessarion’s Bequest and as a constant contender for the coveted position of protopapas of Candia, or rather “vice-protopapas” (the official protopapas had been bestowed by Venice on a loyal Greek subject who otherwise remained pastorally inactive) – which is to say, the pinnacle of the indigenous Greek hierarchy on Crete. Here DESPOTAKIS also refers to Plousiadenos’ gradual loss of the good graces of the colonial regime and even, apparently, of Bessarion himself. DESPOTAKIS suggests that Plousiadenos lost Bessarion’s favor on account of his “general activity of offensive preaching in Chandax [i.e., Candia]” as seen in the latter’s acerbic “encyclical monitory letter” of 1464–1465, where he stridently attacks anti-unionist Greek clergy for persuading the laity to shun unionist ministrations.⁹ This is strange since Bessarion’s letter of admonition sent to the unionist Beneficiaries in 1465 would appear to criticize them for an opposite tendency, namely that members of the Bequest were allegedly fraternizing with Greek priests who did not accept the union – though Bessarion does not mention Plousiadenos’

8. See DESPOTAKIS, p. 23, for this specifically.

9. See DESPOTAKIS, pp. 41–43. This letter has been edited by VASILIOS LAOURDAS, *Ἰωάννου τοῦ Πλουσιαδηνοῦ, ὑποθήκαι πρὸς τοὺς ἱερεῖς τῆς Κρήτης*. *Κρητικά Χρονικά* 5 (1951) pp. 252–262.

name specifically in connection with this charge.¹⁰

The fourth and final chapter of DESPOTAKIS' study (pp. 61–106) considers Plousiadenos in the later stages of his career. In the first place, DESPOTAKIS engages in an intense examination of the scribal activities of Plousiadenos and his circle, particularly as represented by the “Codices Marciani” in Venice representing the fruit of Bessarion’s efforts to enrich his library between 1468 and 1470. DESPOTAKIS proceeds to consider Plousiadenos’ activities in Italy during the early 1470s – his role in Anna Notara’s project to establish a refuge for Byzantine émigrés under the civic mantle of Siena, his involvement in the establishment of the Greek parish at St. Blasius in Venice, and a surprise run-in with the local Inquisition – all while trying to hang on to the office of acting protopapas of Candia. In view of his long absence away from Crete, Plousiadenos’ dogged refusal to yield this office in the face of the counterclaims of other would-be protopapates does no compliment to Plousiadenos’ integrity as a priest. He appears rather as a careerist, absentee pastor. But it was not to last. DESPOTAKIS details Plousiadenos’ definitive loss of the office of vice-protopapas in 1480 when allegations of scandalous and disruptive behavior were brought against him by Venetian authorities. Plousiadenos had to content himself with the Cretan monastery of St. Demetrios de Perati, where he served as *hegoumenos* – a position he had collected as early as 1465. And yet John Plousiadenos made a remarkable comeback. He was able to work his way back into the good graces of Venice such that he was confirmed as Greek bishop of Venetian Methone in the Peloponnese under the name of Joseph in 1491, just in time for the outbreak of hostilities between Venice and the Ottomans at the end of that decade. And this is where Joseph-John’s wrangling career came to an end. On August 9th of the year 1500 the Ottomans broke through the walls of Methone and among their victims was the Bishop Joseph, whose last acts – as commemorated by the Venetian authorities – were marked by courageous heroism in constantly encouraging the defenders of the city to stand fast against the enemy. And so, at his end, we see that there was something more to Joseph-John Plousiadenos than a mere clerical careerist. This is an important point that has not always been sufficiently recognized – certainly not since John Plou-

10. This letter is published (with brief commentary and an Italian translation) by PAOLO ELEUTERI, *Una lettera di Bessarione ai sacerdoti cretesi*. In: GIANFRANCO FIACCADORI (ed.), *Bessarione e l’Umanesimo*. Catalogo della mostra (Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, Saggi e ricerche 1). Naples 1994, pp. 246–248. DESPOTAKIS discusses it on pp. 44–50.

siadenos' integrity was so thoroughly impugned by the Orthodox scholar THEODOROS N. ZISSIS in 1982.¹¹ Can Christian zeal – which for Joseph-John certainly meant unionist conviction – be so easily dismissed in a man who kept his post in the face of certain violent death?

That DESPOTAKIS has been able to give what must now be considered as the definitive biography of John Plousiadenos owes to this scholar's mastery of unedited manuscripts – archival documents and literary productions – and his ability to use them to illuminate Plousiadenos' life and circumstances in remarkable detail. DESPOTAKIS is able to give us a detailed itinerary of Plousiadenos' whereabouts and his social contacts. A highly skilled and versatile paleographer, DESPOTAKIS is at home not only with the notarial documents stored in the Venetian state archive, but the Greek manuscripts produced by Plousiadenos and other unionist scribes in his social ambit. This remarkable versatility is exhibited not only in DESPOTAKIS' study, but in his substantive appendices where he provides transcriptions of key archival documents (pp. 158–189) as well as the first full editions of Plousiadenos' "Prayer to the Holy Spirit" (pp. 109–114; previously this text was only partially edited by Georg Hofmann)¹² and Plousiadenos' even more fascinating manual for the celebration of "catholic confession" (τρόπος τῆς καθολικῆς ἐξομολογήσεως – pp. 115–153). Those of us fascinated by late Byzantine unionism in its pastoral and devotional manifestations owe DESPOTAKIS a debt of gratitude.

In substance, DESPOTAKIS' monograph is superb. I wish the same could be said as to its style. Unfortunately, DESPOTAKIS' monograph is thoroughly marred by very poor English prose. Focusing on defects in style may seem nit-picky, but it is a big problem here. The English style is so consistently poor throughout this book that passages sometimes must be read again and again in order to eke out what can only be judged as a best guess of DESPOTAKIS' intended meaning. This stylistic infelicity contributes to the sense that DESPOTAKIS' monograph is of greater value as a treasure-trove of information than as an argument-driven book. This impression is not helped by DESPOTAKIS' tendency to employ casually terms such as "Uniate" or "Uniatism," "Orthodoxy" or "Catholicism" without defining what these terms precisely entail in this specific historical context and without any apparent fear of anachronism. Differing interpretations of

11. THEODOROS N. ZISSIS, Die Glaubwürdigkeit der Schriften von Johannes Plousiadenos (Joseph von Methone). *JöByz* 32.4 (1982) pp. 347–355.

12. HOFMANN, pp. 110–111.

the terms of union with the Roman Church are clearly in evidence. For instance, DESPOTAKIS describes the hitherto unknown incident of Plousiadenos' run-in with the *inquisitor hereticae pravitatis* in Venice in 1481. And "a few years later, the patriarchate [of Venice] submitted a list of questions to be answered by the Greek priests of the [local Greek parish of St. Blasius]" among which was the following: whether "they use unleavened bread during the Holy Communion." Unfortunately, DESPOTAKIS does not tell us whether the use of unleavened bread for the Eucharist was being enjoined upon or prohibited to the Greek clergy by the Latin patriarch (it may be unclear from the document), but such an inquiry seems to at least raise questions given the Council of Florence's approbation of the use of either kind of bread for the Eucharist (unleavened for the Latins; leavened for the Greeks) – a point that Plousiadenos himself defended in his own theological defense of union.¹³

In my view, these considerations only open the field to further speculation about the meaning of unionism as a late and post-Byzantine phenomenon and within the context of post-Florentine Venetian Crete in particular. DESPOTAKIS' monograph invites researchers to define what, specifically, Greek Christianity united to Rome *is* – in the eyes of the Latin ecclesiastical authorities, the Greek adversaries of union, and, above all, in the minds of the unionists themselves. But any such subsequent attempts to understand the thought of John Plousiadenos and Greeks in his circle will necessarily have recourse to this outstanding work of ELEFTHERIOS DESPOTAKIS as to an anchor firmly grounding such speculations within the concrete historical circumstances and facts of a remarkable place and time, and even more remarkable life.

Keywords

John Plousiadenos; Late Byzantium; theology

13. DESPOTAKIS covers this in pp. 85–87. For Plousiadenos' defense of the Florentine decree on this point, see, e.g., PG 159: 1180–1228.