

Janus Lascaris' Visit to Mount Athos in 1491

Graham Speake

THE IMAGE OF ATHONITE LIBRARIES staffed by ignorant, impoverished monks, who had no use for their contents and were only too happy to sell them off for a few pounds to rapacious collectors, is a popular one. We see it as early as the twelfth century when Eustathius, archbishop of Salonica, in his work on the reform of monastic life admonishes such a monk: "You illiterate fellow, why ever do you wish to reduce the library to the level of your own character? Just because you have no trace of culture, must you empty the library of the books that transmit it?"¹ We see it as late as the 1840s when Robert Curzon is quite shameless in reporting the bargains he struck and the enthusiasm with which some of the monks unloaded their treasures.² How accurate an image is this? Is it fair to either the monks or the collectors? These are some of the questions that interest me when I examine the case of the collector Janus Lascaris.

Lascaris was one of the most respected of all the Greek exiles who found themselves in Italy following the fall of the empire to the Ottomans. Born in 1445 at Rhyndacus in northwest Asia Minor to a distinguished and ancient Byzantine family, he was taken at an early age via the Peloponnese and Crete to Venice where he became a protégé of Cardinal Bessarion. Under Bessarion's guidance the young Lascaris got a good grounding in Latin as well as Greek and mingled with many other Greek refugees and Italian humanists. After Bessarion's death in 1472 he found employment at the court of Lorenzo de' Medici in Florence where he taught Greek; and it was as Lorenzo's agent that he was dispatched on two journeys, in 1490 and 1491, to collect Greek manuscripts in the east and to negotiate their purchase with Sultan Bayezid II.

¹ Ed. T. L. F. Tafel (Frankfurt 1832) §144, cited by N. G. Wilson, "The Libraries of the Byzantine World," *GRBS* 8 (1967) 63.

² R. Curzon, *Visits to Monasteries in the Levant*³ (London 1850).

On the second of these journeys, the only one on which he visited Athos, Lascaris took with him a pocket book, which survives as *Vaticanus gr.* 1412.³ In it he recorded among other items a list of *desiderata*—texts that Lorenzo presumably wished to acquire for his library—and a list of the current contents of that library. The occurrence of some items in both lists suggests perhaps that he was operating as a freelance agent and not just as the representative of Lorenzo. In a third list he records the manuscripts that he either acquired on the journey or that he thought worth making a note of for possible future use and where he found them.

The pocket book is in no sense a diary, as some have described it.⁴ Lascaris simply names the places and lists the manuscripts without any comment. It is a thoroughly professional document (in strong contrast to the garrulous Curzon), although we often find ourselves wishing he could be slightly less laconic. He tells us elsewhere⁵ that he brought 200 manuscripts from Greece to Italy, and yet the notebook lists almost twice that number. True, many of those listed are of such short extent that they were no doubt later bound into composite volumes; but many more must have been left behind.

From Florence Lascaris' itinerary took him to Ferrara, Venice, Padua, Corfu, Arta, Salonica, Galata, Sozopolis, Athos, Salonica, Crete, Apulia, Corigliano, and Monte Sardo. He lists manuscripts acquired or at least seen at each of those points. We shall restrict ourselves to Athos where, apart from one book at Chilandari and another at "Simenou" (which Müller⁶ suggests is Simonopetra but I would propose Esphigmenou on topographical as well as palaeographical grounds), he confined his attention to the collections of Vatopedi and Megiste Lavra. Why he did not also visit Iviron, where there was an equally splendid library of classical texts, is unclear.

Of the seventy-four manuscripts listed, the winning author by a clear margin is Galen with twenty-two entries. He is not

³ First published by K. Müller, "Neue Mittheilungen über Janos Laskaris und die Medicische Bibliothek," *Centralblatt für Bibliothekswesen* 1 (1884) 333–412.

⁴ See e.g. R. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship from 1300 to 1850* (Oxford 1976) 48.

⁵ In the preface to his *editio princeps* of the *Greek Anthology* (Florence 1494).

⁶ (*supra* n.3) 397.

among the *desiderata* for Lorenzo, but he was always in demand for obvious practical reasons, and this may be an instance of Lascaris operating on behalf of somebody else. As early as 1497 Aldus announced his intention of printing the complete works of Galen, although in fact the project was not to be realized until 1525. It is interesting to note that Galen takes only eighth place in popularity among classical manuscripts still remaining on the Mountain today.⁷ Five authors are represented in Lascaris' list by two manuscripts each: Origen (who was among the *desiderata*) and Nicholas the sophist, Philoponus, Simplicius, and Tzetzes (who were not). *Non quot sed qualia....*

At Vatopedi Lascaris must have been particularly elated to find and acquire manuscripts of the minor Attic orators, namely Andocides, Antiphon, Dinarchus, Isaeus, and Lycurgus, all of whom featured among the *desiderata*. They would in due course form the basis for the greater part of the two-volume printed edition of *Rhetorum Graecorum Orationes* that was issued by Aldus at Venice in 1513.⁸ The editor's preface includes a handsome tribute to Lascaris for retrieving them from Athos and to Lorenzo for funding his mission so generously. According to Nigel Wilson,⁹ the minor Attic orators were very little known early in Byzantium; nor were they yet known in Italy; so this was indeed a major find.

Moving on to Megiste Lavra, Lascaris notes a manuscript of Callimachus. This book seems no longer to be extant, nor to be the basis of the *editio princeps* that Lascaris edited for Laurentius Alopa, probably in 1495. The question of what exemplars he did use is vexed;¹⁰ but we may note the existence today of a fifteenth-century manuscript at Vatopedi (no. 671) which includes the *Hymns*, although we can make no assumptions about when it came into that monastery's possession.¹¹

⁷ See S. Rudberg, "Les Manuscrits à contenu profane du Mont-Athos," *Eranos* 54 (1956) 176.

⁸ See N. G. Wilson, *From Byzantium to Italy: Greek Studies in the Italian Renaissance* (London 1992) 187 n.50.

⁹ *Scholars of Byzantium* (London 1983) 229.

¹⁰ See R. Pfeiffer, ed., *Callimachus* (Oxford 1949) II lxxvif.

¹¹ For the dating of this manuscript see N. G. Wilson, *RevHistText* 4 (1974) 139–42, where he identifies the hand with that of Girard of Patras (*fl.* 1420–43).

Next to Callimachus Lascaris notes the fables of Babrius. This author was little known in Byzantium and probably the name meant little or nothing to Lascaris. He obviously left it behind and the text remained unknown until 1842 when Minoides Mynas came across it, still at the Lavra, and sold it to the British Museum. It is a tenth-century manuscript and incomplete, but our only early witness to this author. It is less impressive to record that Mynas later forged another ninety-five fables to 'complete' the text.

Also at the Lavra Lascaris notes a manuscript containing *Id.* 24, 26, and 30 of Theocritus, "all great rarities," according to Gow.¹² He cannot even identify their author and resorts to quoting the first few words of each. *Id.* 30 survives today in only one manuscript which is both defective and extremely corrupt. Lascaris' quotation at least corrects an error in the first word of the poem; but alas he labels the book *diephtarmenon*, damaged beyond repair, and it has disappeared.

The author nowadays most commonly associated with Lascaris' visit to Athos is Plato.¹³ This I find very hard to explain, since the name occurs not once in the list of finds. In fact Lascaris did acquire a complete Plato in Crete. But Plato did not figure among the *desiderata*, no doubt because Lorenzo already had the complete works, as is confirmed by Lascaris' list of his library's contents.

As we have already said, we can make no assumptions about when manuscripts were acquired by the Athonite houses since the process of acquisition continued for several centuries after Lascaris' visit. But among the *desiderata* apparently not satisfied we may note the mention (twice actually!) of Josephus' *Antiquitates Iudaicae*, of which there are now two medieval manuscripts at Vatopedi (386 and 387) and one at the Lavra (H 158).

Josephus apart (and perhaps we should not be too hasty to assume failure there since it seems from the list of the Medici library's contents that Lorenzo already had a copy anyway), Lascaris' successes on Athos are remarkable. It is worth stopping to ask how he achieved them, and why he was entrusted with the task by such a prince as Lorenzo.

¹² A. S. F. Gow, ed., *Theocritus* (Cambridge 1965) I lv n.3.

¹³ See e.g. A. Firmin-Didot, *Alde Manuce et l'hellénisme à Venise* (Paris 1875) 342; D. J. Geanakoplos, *Greek Scholars in Venice* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1962) 150.

From the monks' point of view, Lascaris was first and foremost a fellow Greek, so they all spoke the same language. But he was no ordinary Greek. He was descended from one of the greatest imperial families of Byzantium, and the monks of Athos have always been impressed by a famous name, as Robert Byron was to find as recently as the 1920s. Secondly, he was a bona fide scholar, able to talk with conviction about the virtues of print and to persuade the monks that they were performing a great service to the world of learning by allowing their manuscripts to be used as printer's copy. Thirdly, perhaps most crucially, he was totally committed to the cause of liberating the Greek world and he was well enough connected, not just with Florentine princes but also with the Pope, to be in a position to influence the course of events. We may note that when Lascaris' pupil Marcus Musurus prepared the *editio princeps* of Pausanias for publication in Venice in 1516, he dedicated the work to Lascaris. Describing his master as the "true representative [*proxenos*] of the Greeks," Musurus asserted that Lascaris had devoted his life to the liberation of Greece. "The undertaking of a crusade against the Turks, which is desired by all the world and is constantly on men's lips, Janus works for ceaselessly. But it has not yet taken place because of the petty quarrels of Western princes over one or another unfortunate little town and especially over Italy."¹⁴

Lorenzo no doubt had other reasons for entrusting Lascaris with this mission that was so dear to his heart. He was unusual among the Greeks in exile in that he was both of noble descent and a serious scholar. He was therefore equipped not only to do business with the sultan but also to find his way around an uncatalogued library. Most of the other Greeks in Italy were of humbler origin, mere mechanicals, either scribes or craftsmen. Lascaris was a cut above them. He also shared Lorenzo's commitment to the propagation of Greek studies. He was a gifted teacher and, at least by the standards of the day, a thoroughly competent editor. He was determined to play his part in ensuring that every scrap of his own literary heritage was safely delivered to the compositor.

But let us not lose sight of the monks without whose co-operation none of this would have been possible. Were they really listening to the suggestions of the evil spirit who tells you

¹⁴ Geanakoplos (*supra* n.13) 158.

“Sell these books of yours, spend the money as you please and follow me,” as Eustathius insinuated?¹⁵ Was their attitude really that of the *agoumenos* of St Paul’s who heaped treasures on Curzon saying, “We make no use of the old books, and should be glad if you would accept one”?¹⁶

It should be remembered that in the time of Eustathius the empire was at its height and would surely last forever. There could therefore be no justification for a monastery divesting itself of its treasures. Similarly in Curzon’s day Athos had been under Turkish rule for 400 years and there was equally little likelihood of that state of affairs changing. Morale was low. The Turks had stripped the monasteries of most of their properties. What was the point of keeping a few mouldy old books that no one could read anyway?

In the 1490s things were very different. The empire had fallen within living memory, and with it had gone the last of the old imperial libraries: what hope could there be for the survival of the rich collections on Athos? Surely the only responsible course of action for the monks was to ensure that at least what they still had was preserved for posterity; and the best way to do that was to co-operate with Lascaris. In any case, they were still receiving bequests of manuscripts, many of which were in excess of their own requirements. The influx had always been matched by an outflow, both of older books and of the more recent products of the Athonite scriptoria. In short, by complying with Lascaris’ requests, Athos was simply continuing to play its traditional seminal rôle in the transmission of ancient Greek literature to the world.¹⁷

CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD
April, 1994

¹⁵ Tafel (*supra* n.1) § 128.

¹⁶ (*supra* n.2) 386.

¹⁷ This paper was first presented as a communication to the 28th Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies at the University of Birmingham in March 1994. I am grateful to the abbot and fathers of the monastery of Vatopedi for their generous hospitality and especially to the librarian, Fr Palamas, for his kind assistance.