

Giuseppe L. Coluccia. *Basilio Bessarione: Lo spirito greco e l'Occidente*.
Accademia delle arti del disegno monografie 15. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2009. vii + 443
pp. index. append. illus. bibl. €50. ISBN: 978-88-222-5925-7.

Cardinal Bessarion was one of the most important and interesting figures of the Quattrocento. A Greek who nearly became pope in at least two conclaves, a pivotal participant in Catholic-Orthodox theological discussions from the Council of

Ferrara-Florence in 1438 to his death in 1472; a prominent patron of Greek and Latin intellectuals and a major player in his own right in contemporary debates and cultural developments; and the creator of one of the great libraries of the Renaissance, which he bequeathed to the Republic of Venice and which in time became the historic core of the modern Biblioteca Marciana; Bessarion is inescapable for anyone studying Quattrocento religion, politics, and intellectual life. The last full-length monograph on him was Ludwig Mohler's *Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist und Staatsmann* of 1923. So a new detailed study is long overdue, especially since a vast amount of first-rate scholarship has appeared in the subsequent eighty-six years. Unfortunately, Coluccia's book is an amateurish attempt that does not adequately fit the bill.

As Cesare Vasoli noted in a letter to Coluccia quoted by the latter in the preface (xi), this book is addressed to a popular audience and not just to specialists. And to an extent, Coluccia provides a useful service to anyone who reads Italian. He not only goes through each stage of Bessarion's long and complex life and treats Bessarion's various writings, but also provides translations of some of Bessarion's writings. Even specialists can profit from a bibliographical reference here or a historical datum there, provided by Coluccia, that might have previously escaped their notice. And Coluccia can make some insightful points, such as remarking on the texts not found in Bessarion's library that you would have expected to be there (239). But the problems of the book detract from its good aspects.

To start with an obvious, but not the most serious problem, Coluccia's emphases are skewed. Even in a work of vulgarization it is not helpful to spend a great deal of time handing out kudos to friends such as the dedicatee Emanuela Kretzulesco Quaranta, to quote for nearly a page and a half a novel of Raffaele Gorgoni because with his "sangue greco" he expresses the classical spirit of southern Italy (89–90), to go on at length about Bessarion and the diocese of Mazara with the slightest amount of factual information (97–102), and to add continually paragraphs and pages of color and background that verge on filler. Missing, on the other hand, is due consideration of many important themes, such as Bessarion's involvement with the Franciscans and his decades-long dealings with Venice and its milieu.

More problematic are the numerous factual errors, such as frequently calling Ludwig Mohler "Möhler," treating Bessarion's lament at the fall of Negroponte as a lament at the fall of Constantinople (6n7), placing John Argyropoulos at the Council of Florence (39), calling Mark Eugenicus a pupil of George Scholarius (58) when the reverse was true, attributing to George Gemistos Pletho a concern for commercial prosperity (72), accepting Iacopo Languschi's assertion that Ciriaco d'Ancona serviced Mehmed II (148–49), and so on and so forth; in addition there are silly assertions, such as the assurance that Bessarion weighed about three kilos at birth (3) and the suggestion that Pope Nicholas V was a closet Neoplatonist (167). Finally, as a nonspecialist himself, Coluccia is too trusting of dubious opinions of authorities, such as that MS Marc. Lat. VI, 61 (2592) is autograph (plate 2) or that Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation* reflects Constantinople expiating the sins of the world (xxii).

Although Coluccia should be commended for diligently trying to master the enormous literature on Bessarion, there are some striking omissions, such as of Francesco Russo's *Regesto vaticano per la Calabria*, fourteen volumes to date (1974–), with its rich material on Bessarion and his circle; or of Gerald Etzkorn's 1997 edition of the *De Arcanis Dei* of Bessarion's client Giorgio Benigno Salviati, OFM; or of Margaret Meserve's bibliographical study of Bessarion's *Orations against the Turks* (*The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 97 [2003], 521–88). Several times Coluccia fails to cite the standard modern edition of a text he discusses or quotes. But his strangest citation is to be found in the appendix (425–30), where he combines his translation of Bessarion's *Oratio Dogmatica* with a reproduction of the Greek text in the *Patrologia Graeca*, all the while acknowledging that a modern edition of the Greek text was published by Emmanuel Candal in 1958 and that a sound Italian translation by Gianfranco Lusini has been available since 2001.

In short, although there is much in the book under review that is valuable and although it does provide a detailed narrative that generally exploits well the extensive literature on Bessarion, its failings make it a not-always-trustworthy authority for nonspecialists.

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