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Project Description

Production and Dissemination of Byzantine Military Texts in Early Modern Europe

The fall of Byzantium and the subsequent westward expansion of the Ottoman state caused a continuous flow of Greek migration to the West, and the Greeks soon established communities in their destinations, Italy above all. At the same time, the revival of interest in the classical heritage (the “Renaissance”) created opportunities for those Greeks who possessed calligraphic skills and knowledge of Greek and Byzantine literature. Using their social networks and cultural capital, these émigrés turned to book production and trade, creating and satisfying the demand for Greek manuscripts. Facing the Ottoman advance and being amidst religious turmoil, certain Byzantine sources gained popularity among the elites of Western Europe—the clergy, diplomats, and warlords—who sought to benefit from the ample knowledge found in the treatises that the Greek scribes copied. The dissertation focuses on the transmission, dissemination, reception, and use of these Byzantine texts that were useful for the struggles of various Western European entities against the Ottomans between 1450 and 1600, with the weight of the study lying in Byzantine military texts that were copied in the 16th century. The research concentrates on two main groups of people: first, those who produced and supplied such texts, namely scribes, printers, book collectors, or book merchants; and second, various Western political and military figures who needed such knowledge in their struggle against their adversaries.

Producing or purchasing manuscripts may not seem convenient at first glance, considering the advance of the printing press and the volume of printing that Italy and the German-speaking regions had by the 16th century. Thus, the study looks beyond individuals’ desires to merely read or possess manuscript copies, as these cannot be the sole reasons for having a manuscript copy of these works made. By setting forth a holistic approach to book collections or private libraries and taking the material culture into consideration, the project aims to bring a new perspective in understanding the intellectual projects of individuals, the networks, and the relations between the figures on both sides of manuscript production. Thus, the study takes social, cultural, and political contexts into account, granting the reader the ability to evaluate the same text in a different light. To achieve this goal, the paratexts found on the manuscripts, personal correspondences, and archival documents (such as book collection donation documents) are inspected. Although Byzantine military texts constitute the bulk of the research, the manuscripts under the scope of the study are not exclusively of a military nature. Historiographies, geographical works, and texts containing ethnographical information regarding the Ottomans are also considered.

By examining two main groups, the scribes and their patrons, the project seeks to answer two questions: What were the scribes' motivations for copying and marketing the Byzantine texts under study? What motivated patrons to have these specific works reproduced for themselves? Consequently, answering these questions will lead to a better comprehension

of the dynamics of reproduction, dissemination, and reception of Byzantine military texts in Europe in the 16th century.