

Byzantines in the Florentine *polis*: Ideology, Statecraft and Ritual during the Council of Florence¹

Stuart M. McManus
University of Manchester

λογωι μεν δημοκρατια, εργωι δε ‘υπο του πρωτου ‘ανδρος ‘αρχη. ²

Introduction

In 1439 Leonardo Bruni, the Chancellor of the Florentine Republic, wrote a treatise about the political system of his adopted homeland which has perplexed scholars. In it, he seems to deny the assumption upon which the majority of his previous political works is based: that Florence’s government had a popular basis.³ However, a few months before the presumed date of composition of the treatise, the elected rulers of the city went on foot to the gates of the city to meet an Emperor, a ritualistic act designed to underline their humble origins as representatives of a popular republic.⁴ This seems to represent a discrepancy. Why would representatives of the same mercantile Republic present their polity at one point as ‘popular’ and anti-aristocratic, and soon after claim that this was not in fact the case? The beginnings of an answer may be found in the fact that both these events took place during the Council of Florence, an ecumenical council, which had been transferred from Basle to Ferrara, before finally arriving in Florence in 1439.

¹ This piece reproduces some of the material from the first chapter of my master’s dissertation entitled: ‘The Greeks and the Florentine *polis*’ in S. M. McManus, ‘The Greek experience at the Council of Florence’ (University of Manchester Masters thesis, 2008), pp. 10-28. The completion of this dissertation was aided by Postgraduate Summer Abroad Grant from the School of Languages, Linguistics and Cultures at the University of Manchester. I also wish to thank Professor Stephen J. Milner, Dr David S. Laven and Professor Tim Parkin for their advice and help; however, I myself am naturally responsible errors or infelicities contained herein.

² ‘In theory democracy but, in reality, the rule of the principle citizen’ (Thucydides).

³ Gordon Griffiths, James Hankins and David Thompson (eds), *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni* (New York: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1987), pp. 115-6, 171-4, henceforth *The Humanism*.

⁴ ‘Domini civitatis ad civitatis portam pedes advenere.’ Gill, Joseph et al. (eds), *Concilium Florentinum: Documenta et Scriptores* (Rome: 1940-76), henceforth *Concilium Florentinum*: vol. vi, *Andrea de Santacroce advocatus consistorialis: Acta Latina concilii Florentini*, Georg Hofmann (ed.) (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1955), pp.

The Council of Florence was the culmination of attempts by the Byzantine Orthodox Church, based in Constantinople, to unite in faith with the Catholic Church in the West, in order to secure a crusade to save Constantine's 'Second Rome' from the onslaught of the Ottoman Turks. This Council was also the last in a series of ecumenical Councils in the West in the first half of the Quattrocento which had sought to deal with the problems of schism and disorder which afflicted the western Church.⁵ This multifaceted Council naturally has as many interpretations as it does historians, with the authoritative voice of the British Jesuit Joseph Gill rightly soaring above the rest.⁶ All students of the Council must make recourse to Gill and his expert historical and theological study, and it was only by building on his study that a variety of more recent interpretations have emerged, which interpret the Council as the 'magna carta della restaurazione pontificia', or the defining moment in the birth of renaissance Platonism.⁷ However, if we attempt to define the Council at a fundamental level, it was simply a diplomatic encounter between Latin and Greek ecclesiastics and secular potentates within the territory of a third entity, the Florentine polity.

Viewing the Council as a diplomatic encounter, rather than mainly through the prism of theology, as Gill tends to do, or through prism of the development of Humanism, as others have, we are left with an intriguing coming-together of three highly ideologically and historically diverse groups. The ideological and historical dichotomy between the ancient Byzantine autocracy, and to a lesser extent also the Papacy, and the comparatively youthful Florentine *res publica* is striking, and, according to the late Richard Trexler, may have had a strong influence on the diplomatic statecraft employed by the Florentines during the stay of these foreign dignitaries. Trexler explains Florentine diplomatic praxis and its associated ritual in terms of the fear of 'mediocrity' in the face of the foreign Prince, and as the result of a desire to show both a united city, which could be trusted in diplomatic encounters, and that Florence was on a par with other states, despite its ignobility and

134, henceforth *Acta Latina*.

⁵ Joseph Gill, *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), pp. 11-5, 16-45, henceforth Gill, *The Council*.

⁶ Ibid. Joseph Gill et al. (eds), *Concilium Florentinum: Documenta et Scriptores*, 13 vols, (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1940-76).

⁷ Carlo Fantappiè, *Introduzione storica al diritto canonico* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1999), pp. 160. Anna Pontani, 'Firenze nelle fonti greche del Concilio' in Paolo Viti (ed.), *Firenze e il Concilio di 1439* (Firenze: L. S. Olschki, 1994), pp. 753-812, henceforth *Firenze e il Concilio*.

lack of an official figurehead.⁸ Thus, there seems to be an ideological purpose behind ritual in terms of improving both the city's internal self-image and legitimising it in the eyes of the foreign dignitaries.

Florentine civic ideology of this period is bound up with the term 'civic humanism' originally coined by Hans Baron, although to what extent this terminology is still useful is not as clear as it was. Baron stated unequivocally that the classical republicanism of Leonardo Bruni and his contemporaries marked a distinct departure from existing medieval traditions, which was triggered by the ongoing wars between republican Florence and aristocratic Milan and took its ideological weaponry from the new classically-minded intellectual movement of humanism in order to present Florence as the heir to the Roman Republic.⁹ Although there are now various competing theories as to the exact character and genesis of the Florentine political ideology contemporary to the Council of 1439, there are two motifs which seem to be central to understanding of the Florentine polity on an ideological level: the republican ideal vis-à-vis 'subjugation' to a monarch taken from earlier guild republican rhetoric, expressed in the exclusion of the nobility ('magnates'), and the importance of the classical tradition in justifying this.¹⁰ At the same time, the exact nature of Florentine ideology seems not to have been fixed and shows significant variation, which might explain why there is so much scholarly debate on the exact nature of civic humanism.

If Florence claimed to be the contemporary manifestation of republican Rome, the Byzantine delegation could rightly claim to be the almost direct descendant of a historically related, but in reality strikingly different political reality, imperial Rome. In the Byzantine tradition, the emperor was the sovereign ruler of empire, while also enjoying considerable authority within the Orthodox Church, a dual role once referred to as 'Caesaropapism', unlike in the medieval West where there

⁸ Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (London: Academic Press, 1980), p. 297, 314, henceforth, Trexler, *Public Life*.

⁹ James Hankins, 'The "Baron Thesis" after Forty Years and Some Recent Studies on Leonardo Bruni', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 56: 2 (1995), 309-38, (pp. 309-13). Idem, 'Introduction', in James Hankins (ed.), *Renaissance Civic Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 1-13, this volume will henceforth be *Renaissance Civic Humanism*. Quentin Skinner, *The foundations of modern political thought*, vol. I, *Renaissance* (Cambridge: CUP, 1978), pp. 35-4. Although it is out with the remit of this paper, it must be stressed that the Florentine political system in reality was dominated by the elite, and the electoral system was manipulated by the Medici and others. Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence under the Medici (1434 to 1494)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp. 30-52, etc., henceforth, Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence*.

¹⁰ Mikael Hörnquist, 'The two myths of civic humanism' in *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, pp. 105-142, (pp. 136-7).

was a separation between the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor.¹¹ In contrast to the emphasis in the Florentine republican system on the will of the *popolo*, in Byzantium all citizens were technically ‘serfs’ of the emperor, while the aristocracy was generally based not on rank or hereditary titles but on wealth and influence.¹² Thus, from the perspective of political ideology, the autocratic Byzantine state, with its imperial cult and single figurehead who had almost unquestionable authority, could arguably not have been more different from the Florentine guild republic.

After briefly outlining the reasons for the transfer of the Council to Florence, this study will seek to understand the seemingly contradictory cases of Florentine self-presentation with regard to civic ideology during the Council, by taking examples from both public ritual practice, such as the ceremony for the arrival of the Emperor, and more esoteric self-presentation in historical and political works, such as Bruni’s treatise, before finally looking at a more private and personal Florentine example. Furthermore, the usefulness of this seemingly mutable ideology to the advancement of the aims of the city will also be considered, to better understand what the mercantile Florentines intended to gain from this exceptional event in their history.

A Florentine Council

Turning to the reasons for translation of the Council, which represented a significant diplomatic coup for Florence, the official reason given for the transfer from Ferrara to Florence in 1439 was the outbreak of plague, ‘quam cuncti naturaliter timent’, in the city. The bull states:

ad civitatem Florentiam, omnibus manifeste liberam, securam, pacificam et quietam, aërisque salubritate lentantem, et ad quam inter Tirenium Adriaticumque mare optime sitam,

¹¹ ‘[...] egli impersonava l’impero bizantino, simbolizzava, incarnava in forma materiale e sensibile la sua implicita potenza. La dottrina politica bizantina presentava l’imperatore come una divinità terrestre’ (Alexander Kazhdan, *Bisanzio e la sua civiltà* (Rome: Laterza, 1995), p. 69. Deno John Geanakoplos, *Byzantine East and Latin West: two worlds of Christendom in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966) pp. 55-83, and a critique of the theory based on the later development of the thought of the same author: Giles Constable, *People and Power in Byzantium: An Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Centre for Byzantine Studies, 1982), p. 147, henceforth *People and Power in Byzantium*.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 24, 144.

ab Orientalibus et Occidentalibus commode accedi potest.¹³

Recent scholarship has largely debunked these claims highlighting, firstly, that the pestilence was no less present in Florence than Ferrara in this period, and, secondly, that Florence itself was under threat from the forces of Milan.¹⁴ Although the importance of Florence's superior financial resources should not be underestimated, as the Greek anti-unionist chronicler Syropoulos maintains ('[...] les Florentins sont gens probes et riches'), other factors, such as the existing diplomatic obligations between the Papacy and Florence should not be disregarded.¹⁵ In terms of reciprocity, the translation to Florence may be seen as the return 'gift' to Florence after it had offered the Pope refuge and finance in 1434. This period marked the nadir of Eugenius' fortunes after having lost control of Rome to the Colonna family and much of territory to other states, all this, combined with the efforts of the Fathers in Basle to undermine his ecclesiastical position, meant that his income and prestige were severely reduced. In this light, Florence's decision to grant asylum to the Pope was a risky tactical move.¹⁶ In terms of the value of the Council to Florence, it brought not just wealth to the city, as ecumenical councils required huge amounts of foodstuffs and raw materials which had to be sourced from the local area, but also honour and perceived legitimacy to the city and the new Medici oligarchy.¹⁷ This prestige value of hosting an ecumenical council cannot be underestimated, especially one which included both a Pope and an Emperor for the city of 'usurers, sodomites, and handworkers'. Its value is most apparent when placed within the context of Florence's continuing attempts to justify itself and its civic ideology on the Italian political scene in the face of powers, such as Naples and Milan, with more noble and

¹³ '[The plague] which all by nature fear [causes the translation of the Council] to the city of Florence which is in every way free, secure, peaceful and tranquil, with its healthy air and excellent location between the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic seas as well as affording easy access from both East and West.' Gill, Joseph et al., eds., *Concilium Florentinum: Documenta et Scriptores* (Rome: 1940-76), henceforth *Concilium Florentinum*: vol. vi, *Andrea de Santacroce advocatus consistorialis: Acta Latina concilii Florentini*, ed by Georg Hofmann (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1955), pp. 132-3, henceforth *Acta Latina*.

¹⁴ Anthony Molho, 'L'economia e la finanza pubblica fiorentina alla vigilia del Concilio', *Firenze e il Concilio*, pp. 59-94. However, a Florentine account supports this: 'Per la peste che era a Ferrara (in)volette il Papa tornare a Firenze' (Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (BNCF), II, I, 148, fol. 144r). 'Intanto le genti del Duca avevano preso Lignova.' (Florence, BNCF, II, I, 148, fol. 144r).

¹⁵ *Concilium Florentinum*: vol. ix, Vitalien Laurent (ed.), *Les 'Memoirs' de Sylvestre Syropoulos*, (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1971), pp. 377, henceforth *Les 'Memoirs'*. For the financial guarantees offered by Florence to the Pope. *Concilium Florentinum*: vol. iii fasc. i, Georg Hofmann S.J. (ed.), *Acta Camerae Apostolicae et civitatum Venetiarum, Ferrariae, Ianuae, de Concilio Florentino* (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1950), docs 59-60.

¹⁶ Gill, *The Council*, p. 56, 185.

¹⁷ 'Una consacrazione solenne del regime recentemente impiantato [...].' R. Fubini, 'Problemi di politica fiorentina all'epoca del concilio' in *Firenze e il Concilio*, pp. 27-58, (pp. 27-8). Raymond de Roover, *The rise and decline of the*

ancient lineages, yet which had never hosted an ecumenical council.¹⁸

Public Presentation

Turning first to public ritual during the Council, the arrival of the Greek delegates, which left the Florentines as awestruck by the Greeks, as the Greeks were by the city ('gloriosa ubi Florentina amplissima est').¹⁹ The Council falls within a period described by Trexler as the heyday of Florentine diplomatic ritual, when sensitivity to subtleties in ritual praxis would have been at its height, a theory supported by the sheer amount of detail recorded in Florentine chronicles. In general, the further from their *palazzo* the *signori* of the city went to greet the delegates, the greater the honour. Although the Patriarch was greeted at the entrance to the city, at the *porta di San Gallo*, it was not by the *signori*, but by two cardinals and the papal court, perhaps underlining his purely ecclesiastical role, before, at the end of his anticlockwise procession around the outline of the ancient *castrum*, he went to meet the *signori* at the *ringhiera*, the 'altar' of Republic.²⁰ In contrast, the Emperor was met at the same gate by the *priori* of the city and all the other elected officials of importance, headed by Cosimo de' Medici, the leader of the ruling faction, who had been 'conveniently' elected as *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia* for this period.²¹ The *priori* went to greet him on foot at the head of a large delegation, and there were also most likely at least five hundred patrician youths on horseback, representing the 'quality' of the city, as this was the number that greeted the Patriarch, although it is not mentioned in any sources.²² Finally, the greeting ceremony was completed the next day when the Emperor was presented with gifts, consisting mainly of

Medici Bank, 1397-1494 (London: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 124.

¹⁸ Trexler, *Public Life*, p. 279.

¹⁹ Vespasiano da Bisticci, *Vite di uomini illustri del secolo XV*, P. d'Ancona and E. Aeschlimann (eds), (Milano: U. Hoepli, 1951), pp. 247. 'The glorious city of Florence is most vast.' *Documenta et Scriptores*: vol xi, Jan Krajcar S.J. (ed.), *Documenta slavica* (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1976), pp. 63.

²⁰ Trexler, *Public Life*, p. 307, 315-6. Bartolomeo del Corazza, 'Diario Fiorentino di Bartolomeo di Michele del Corazza, anni 1405-1438', G.O. Corazzini (ed.), *Archivio storico italiano*, XIV (1894), pp. 233-98, (p. 296), henceforth del Corazza, 'Diario'. Ilaria Ciseri, 'Spiritualità e spettacolo nella Firenze del Concilio: cerimoniale diplomatico e sacre rappresentazioni', in *Firenze e il Concilio*, pp. 437-56, (p. 445, fig. 2).

²¹ For lists of the *priori*, see: del Corazza, 'Diario', p. 295; Florence, BNCF Conventi Soppressi C4, 895, fol. 140v; Florence; Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (BML), 61, 35c, fol. 169v.

²² 'Domini civitatis ad civitatis portam pedes advenere.' *Acta Latina*, p. 134. 'Andarongli incontro sino alla porta i Signori, Collegi, Capitani di Parte, Dieci di Balìa, Otto Officiali di Monte, Sei di Mercatanzia, e le sette maggiori Arti, e molti altri cittadini con lo stendardo, e poi sette Cardinali con tutta la corte, e tutti i baroni e altri greci di detto Imperadore, che erano già in Firenze.' (Del Corazza, 'Diario', p. 296).

expensive foodstuffs in elaborately decorated bowls.²³

Looking at the ritual surrounding the arrival of the Byzantine delegates, various important features are apparent, which were designed to highlight the popular, republican basis of the polity. Firstly, the fact that the elected officials *en masse* were so prominent, be that the *priori*, whom the Patriarch met at the highly politically charged *ringhiera*, which itself served to highlight the link between political power (palazzo) and the space associated with direct popular decision making (the piazza), or the entire breadth of Florentine office holders, in the case of the Emperor.²⁴ Although it is possible to describe Cosimo de' Medici's prominent role as *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia* as anti-republican, it is important to remember that within the ritual of greeting dignitaries he remained simply one of nine elected officials who represented Florence, and walked to meet the Emperor with the others, as opposed to riding in the aristocratic fashion.²⁵ Secondly, the ritual of 'capitulation' is an excellent example of how the Florentines sought to underline the dichotomy between their political system and that of the visiting prince. This ceremony, which took place immediately upon arrival in the city, involved the Emperor vowing before notaries to respect the freedom of the Republic and not to abuse his position as autocrat to undermine the city's government ('ed ivi lessono il rogo de' patti [...]').²⁶ The only element of the ritual of greeting which is slightly ambiguous is the presence of a large number of patrician youths on horseback in the entourage that met the Emperor. Trexler argues that these figures represented the 'quality' of the city; however, these up-and-coming young men on horseback do resemble closely equestrian aristocratic youths, although this may have simply served to add to the pageantry, and may not have been imbued with such an interpretation considering the myriad of popular motifs in the ritual.²⁷

Although it is all well and good to outline the popular character of the ritual of greeting foreign princes, it also important to consider the possible reasons for this stress on 'popular' nature of the polity. In the first place a show of strength, pride and unity before the foreign prince was certainly

²³ Del Corazza, 'Diario', p. 296-7. Trexler, *Public Life*, p. 309, 324.

²⁴ Stephen J. Milner, 'Citing the Balcony: The Politics of Place and Public Address in Trecento Florence', *Italian Studies*, 55 (2000), 53-82, (p. 62).

²⁵ Trexler, *Public Life*, pp. 306-7.

²⁶ Florence, BNCF Conventi Soppressi C4, 895, fol. 140r. Del Corazza, 'Diario', p. 296.

²⁷ Trexler, *Public Life*, pp. 297, 304-7.

advantageous as it served to win his trust so as to facilitate the later diplomatic process. This would have been bolstered by the act of gift-giving the following day, which would have helped cement the prince's positive impression of the city, as well as creating an obligation for the prince to reciprocate in some form at a later date. However, considering Najemy's view of the importance to the ruling oligarchy of maintaining the myth of the 'popular Republic' in order to prevent the return to truly popular government, perhaps the stress on the popular nature of the polity is simply to prevent the Florentine public drawing too many parallels between their own political system and that of the Emperor, considering its sensitivity to ritual in this period.²⁸ In reality, it is likely that there is an element of truth in both of these assertions, with the presence of Cosimo de' Medici among the *Priori* perhaps a glimpse of the oligarch pulling with strings of the 'popular' puppet-show.

'Esoteric' Presentation

The Chancellor of the Florentine Republic, Leonardo Bruni, who made a now lost oration at the arrival of the Emperor,²⁹ occupies a unique position within the nexus of interaction between the polity and the Greeks, as he was one of the city's highest officials, while, at the same time, he appears to have met with a number of the more learned Greeks on a more personal level as well, naturally aided by his competency in Greek.³⁰ Considering Bruni's unique role as both representative of the Florentine polity at an official level, and as one of the few Latins who could and did interact freely with the Greeks, perhaps the closest thing the Greeks had to a confidant among the Florentine hierarchy apart from Traversari, his tractate, *On the Florentine Constitution*, takes on an interesting hue.³¹ The tractate itself is a description of the political processes and structures of the Florentine Republic, using Aristotelian terminology to describe a state which is neither wholly popular nor aristocratic, about which has been much scholarly debate as to whether it represents, among other things: Bruni's own view of the polity, a later development of his

²⁸ John M. Najemy, 'Civic Humanism and Florentine Politics', in *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, pp. 75-104, (p. 81).

²⁹ Florence, BNCF Conventi Soppressi C4, 895, fol. 140r. Viti suggests that the oration was in fact the text of *On the Florentine Constitution* discussed below, however, gives no reason why this should be the case. Paolo Viti 'Leonardo Bruni e il Concilio del 1439', in *Firenze e il Concilio*, pp. 509-575 (p.569).

³⁰ Most famously with George Gemistos 'Plethon': Sebastiano Gentile, 'Giorgio Gemisto Plethone e la sua influenza sull'umanesimo Fiorentino', *Firenze e il Concilio*, pp. 813-32 (p. 823).

³¹ Traversari wrote: 'Vale in Domino, et cura, ne Graeci nostri sine tecto remaneant' ('Go with God and take care of it, lest our Greeks remain with out a roof over their heads.')

previous more 'popular' interpretations, or a clever piece of Florentine self-presentation which panders to the Byzantine political *forma mentis*.³² Leaving aside for the moment the exact degree to which the tractate does or does not represent the reality of Florentine political life, it is apparent that some commentators fail to give sufficient weight to the fact that it was written during the Council of Florence, specifically for consumption by the Greeks, whereas Bruni's earlier political works, for example, the *Laudatio Florentiae urbis* or the *Oratio in funere Ioannis Stroze*, to which the work in question is often compared and contrasted, had a Florentine audience and, to a large extent, an internal Florentine political purpose in mind.³³ Thus, we must see the work within the nexus of Florentine relations with the Greeks, especially considering that, if there was no Latin translation, and there is no evidence of one until 1484, it was not intended for general Florentine consumption, with this limited circulation being assured by the fact that it was written in Greek, the humanist's 'secret code'.³⁴

The treatise itself opens with the assertion that it has been written to satisfy the curiosity of the Greeks, perhaps because the Greeks had been struck to some extent by the inconsistencies between the popular emphasis in civic ritual and the existence of a ruling oligarchy, and so were curious as to how the system functioned. Although the text does not claim that the city's government is entirely popular, neither does it go down the path of completely denying the popular elements of the Florentine political system, as one might have expected considering the autocratic leanings of the work's intended audience.³⁵ This is, arguably, because to deny completely the popular element would have been to deny the popular basis of Florentine ritual statecraft, which the Greeks had already experienced at length, and would have the effect of portraying the city as divided, and

Firenze' in *Firenze e il Concilio*, pp. 799-598 (p. 584). *The Humanism*, pp. 171-4.

³² Brief discussions of these issues are found in: James Hankins, 'Rhetoric, history, and ideology: the civic panegyrics of Leonardo Bruni' in *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, pp. 143-78, (173-4); and Athanasios Moulakis, 'Civic humanism, realist constitutionalism, and Francesco Guicciardini's *Discorso di Logrognò*' in *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, pp. 200-22, (pp. 203-4).

³³ Although it seems to have been copied a number of times in the course of the fifteenth century as it was beyond question an intriguing piece for humanists, it is doubtful Bruni intended it to have such a wide circulation. Athanasios Moulakis, 'Leonardo Bruni's *Constitution of Florence*' *Rinascimento*, 26 (1986), 141-190, (pp. 161-74), (for an assessment of its verisimilitude, pp. 148-54), henceforth, Moulakis, 'Leonardo Bruni'.

³⁴ Moulakis, 'Leonardo Bruni', pp. 186-90. James Hankins, 'Rhetoric, history, and ideology: the civic panegyrics of Leonardo Bruni' in James Hankins (ed.), *Renaissance Civic Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 143-78, (174).

³⁵ *People and Power in Byzantium*, p. 24, 144.

uncertain of its own identity, a situation which the abundance of ritual was meant to avoid.³⁶ Furthermore, there is certainly a degree of self-censorship on a number of issues, the inclusion of which would have undermined either the ritual emphasis on the popular nature of the polity, or the trust of the Greeks, whose own autocratic system left them with a bias against democracy. Bruni carefully walks the ideological tightrope, on the one hand mentioning the two ‘plebeians of the guilds’ among the nine *Priori*, but at the same time neglecting to mention that the other seven members were also taken from the guilds (*arti maggiori*), oddly calling them members of the ‘aristocratic and wealthy class’. This balance between maintaining the semi-popular thesis, and not wishing to suggest that the majority of the highest office could all be cloth merchants, silk merchants or furriers, is carefully struck, reflecting the two exigencies at play: the need to maintain a coherent civic ideology in the eyes of the visiting monarch, and the need to present the city in terms which would appeal to Byzantine sensibilities and so favour diplomatic activity. Yet, it is Bruni’s final comments in the *Constitution* which are perhaps the most revealing. In the final few lines, Bruni historicizes the Florentine political system, stating that it had developed from a more popular form to its state in 1439 due to the changes in military techniques: ‘and then it seemed that political power should no longer be in the multitude, but in the hands of the aristocrats and the wealthy, because they contributed so much to the community [...]’.³⁷ At the end of the work, Bruni chooses to stress the aristocratic element of the political system, rather than the popular, perhaps to leave his Byzantine readers with the impression that the Florentine polity did not differ so much from their own ideological models. Doubtless, the work would not have been written in this way without the decisive presence of the Byzantine Emperor in the city, which caused Bruni to present his city in terms which lean more towards the sensibilities of a Byzantine autocrat than he was normally inclined to, so as to further the city’s diplomatic ambitions, while the need for maintaining the normal façade of the entirely popular Republic could be disregarded as the populace was not the intended audience, and in any case, could not read Greek.

Private imagining

Looking forward to 6 July 1439 and the Decree of Union, *Laetentur caeli*, which was promulgated

³⁶ Trexler, *Public Life*, p. 297.

³⁷ Moulakis, ‘Leonardo Bruni’, pp. 145-9. *The Humanism*, p. 171, 174.

with great pomp in the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore Florence, it is clear that the city finally got its wish. However, although hosting a successful ecumenical council was a major success in itself for Florence, something neither of Florence's more 'noble' rival polities, Naples and Milan, could boast, and the Council had doubtless brought significant wealth to the city, the Emperor was still bound by the some of the combined obligations resulting from the gifts and honours showered on him and his delegation by the city. As a result, soon after the end of the Council the Emperor undertook various acts of reciprocity to fulfil the obligations placed on him. Florence had been pressing the Byzantines since 1416 for the trading rights in Constantinople enjoyed by Pisa, which Florence now owned, and this was granted by the Emperor in August 1439, along with an exception from half of all import duties.³⁸ This particular gift was doubtless subtly suggested to the Emperor by the Florentines during the course of the Council, and is a perfect example of how Florence used ritual statecraft and the systems of gift-giving and reciprocity during diplomatic encounters to benefit itself economically. Furthermore, although the Emperor could not offer the Florentines much of direct monetary value, given the reduced state of his 'empire', what he could offer Florence were imperial privileges, which had value as 'symbolic capital', particularly to Florence, given the city's perceived lack of nobility.³⁹ These symbolic 'gifts' were given to the *Priori*, as representatives of the city, and included making them palatine Counts with the right to use the imperial aquiline insignia and giving them the right to create imperial notaries and legitimise bastards.⁴⁰

Interestingly, in a manuscript in the *Biblioteca Nazionale* in Florence, there is a little known account of the events of the Council, which includes an Italian translation of the document which gave one of the priori from a minor guild (*artigiani*), Domenicho di Tano Petrucci *colticiaio* from Sancta Maria Novella quarter of the city, the aforementioned rights and privileges.⁴¹ The account

³⁸ Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures 1435-1439*, ed. by Malcolm Lewis (London: Routledge, 1926), p. 145. Müller (ed.), *Documenti sulle relazioni delle città toscane coll'Oriente cristiano e coi Turchi fino all'anno MDXXXI*, (Rome: Società multigrafica editore, 1966), docs CI, CXXI, CXXII, henceforth *Documenti sulle relazioni*.

³⁹ Trexler, *Public Life*, p. 297.

⁴⁰ *Documenti sulle relazioni*, doc CXXII. For a list of the *priori*, see: Florence, BNCF Conventi soppressi, C4 895, fol. 140v. For the importance of legitimacy in renaissance Florence see: Gene Brucker (ed.), *The Society of Renaissance Florence* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1998), pp. 40-42.

⁴¹ Florence, BNCF, Conventi soppressi, C4 895 fol. 141r-142r. It has only recently come to my attention that whole codex has, in fact, been published, however, the circulation of the volume has been so limited, that there is, according to OPAC, only one copy in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, the edition is a simple critical edition without particular critical comments on Petriboni's narrative. Thus, I have decided to include a digital image and my own transcription of the section in question, which naturally differs somewhat from the printed edition, as it is a true transcription (Pagolo di

was written by a papal *calculator* originally from Florence, Pagolo di Matteo Petriboni, whose family had once been prominent in the quarter of Santa Maria Novella, but had since fallen on hard times. This document is particularly noteworthy as it confirms that there were individual copies of these privileges made for each prior, and that there was a translation produced in Latin for them, as hitherto, only Greek copies given to the Commune were known to have been made.⁴² Petrucci himself is an unusual figure in that his family succeeded in being promoted from the ranks of the *artigiani* to the *arti maggiori* in the mid-Quattrocento, as a result of their staunch support of the Medici oligarchy right from its return in 1434, while the link between the two men, which may have permitted Petriboni access to the document for the purpose of writing his *Priorista*, was probably the fact they both had roots in the same quarter of the city, and thus may have already been acquainted before the Council.⁴³ The reason for giving so much attention to this transcription of a Byzantine legal text in a Florentine political chronicle (*Priorista*), is that its tone, thanks to the Byzantine legal formulae, is so at odds with Florentine political ideology and so seems very out of place. Not only does it stress the Emperor's unique ability to judge virtuous men and distribute patronage accordingly ('liberamente concedendo e colloro reale splendore molti extollendo e rinnalzando'), but also his position as a divinely elected monarch ('i Re e prencipi ordinati e costuiti e ghouernati e churati diuinalmente').⁴⁴ Although this is a private historical account, unlike, say, Bruni's *Historiarum Florentini populi*, Petriboni must have recognised the ideological ambiguity, perhaps even danger, of an autocrat distributing privileges to Florentine citizens within the city itself, and indeed ennobling an elected *prior*!⁴⁵ Following Trexler, it could be argued that the inclusion of such a document could only have been acceptable during the visit of an important monarch, when the Florentines were confronted with the 'charismatic force' of a prince, around whom they rallied, as this allowed them to 'articulate their political and social bonds' in a city without a permanent official figurehead. Furthermore, the fact that the prince had judged one of their fellow citizens, to whom the author obviously had some sort of personal connection, to be

Matteo Petriboni, *Priorista: 1407-1459*, Jacqueline A. Gutwirth and Gabriella Battista (eds), (Roma : Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2001), henceforth *Priorista*).

⁴² *Documenti sulle relazioni*, docs CXXI, CXXII. We can safely say that Petriboni translated the document from a Latin copy, as his education and lowly position in the curia makes it most unlikely that he had a command of Greek (*Priorista*, pp. 27-29, 44).

⁴³ Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence*, p.44, 251, 262, 289.

⁴⁴ See appendix: Florence, BNCF, Conventi soppressi, C4 895 fol. 141v

⁴⁵ Although there is no evidence that the *priori* actually used this title given by the Emperor, they did continue to use the imperial insignia as part of coat of arms (Luigi Borgia, 'L' Aquila dell' impero romano d'Oriente: Concessioni araldiche durante il concilio di Firenze', in *Firenze e il Concilio*, pp. 457-89, (p. 485, fig. 9).

virtuous, a characteristic with which only the nobility were born and Florentine guildsmen had to strive for, doubtless occasioned a great sense of pride in Petriboni, which overrode any misgivings about ennobling elected *artigiani* in a polity which expressly forbade nobles and magnates from holding office. Thus, looking at the concessions to the city and its *priori* after the Council as a whole, these acts of reciprocity on the part of the Emperor in response to previous Florentine gift-giving, and statecraft obviously gave rise to a great feeling of pride among Florentines. Furthermore, the Florentine ‘fear of mediocrity’ in the face of the monarch was also momentarily dispelled by the honours shown to the Commune by the Prince, although to accomplish this certain ideological tenants of the Florentine state had to be overlooked.⁴⁶

Conclusions

Attempting to draw some preliminary conclusions about the presentation of Florentine political ideology during the brief period of the Council in 1439, it is clear that the presence of the Byzantine delegation did affect this already mutable phenomenon. Indeed, there is much truth in Trexler’s assertion that the presence of a prince, in this case the Byzantine Emperor, in the mercantile Republic was a decisive factor in conditioning both ritual praxis and Florentine self-imagination, to which it is now possible to add more esoteric self-presentation, such as Bruni’s *On the Florentine Constitution*. The main criterion for choosing the type of ideological presentation appears to have been a very pragmatic one: the intended audience. In the case of public ritual, such as the greeting of the Emperor, at which much of the population was probably present as it was Carnival Sunday, the ideological slant is strongly popular, although this was also arguably a codified part of diplomatic ritual designed to show Florentine pride and strength. In the case of non-public, perhaps even ‘secret’ exchange, such as Bruni’s treatise *On the Florentine Constitution*, we have a far less ‘popular’ presentation of the city. This is arguably because the population was not the intended audience, and so any need to maintain Najemy’s ‘myth’ of the Florentine republic could be subordinated to the need for diplomatic *rapprochement* between the Greeks and the polity. This was achieved through changing how Florentine political ideology was presented, to bring it closer to that of the Byzantines, although without going as far to contract directly previous motifs used during the public rituals. Finally, and most intriguingly, Florentine self-imagination as

⁴⁶ Trexler, *Public Life*, p. 297, 314.

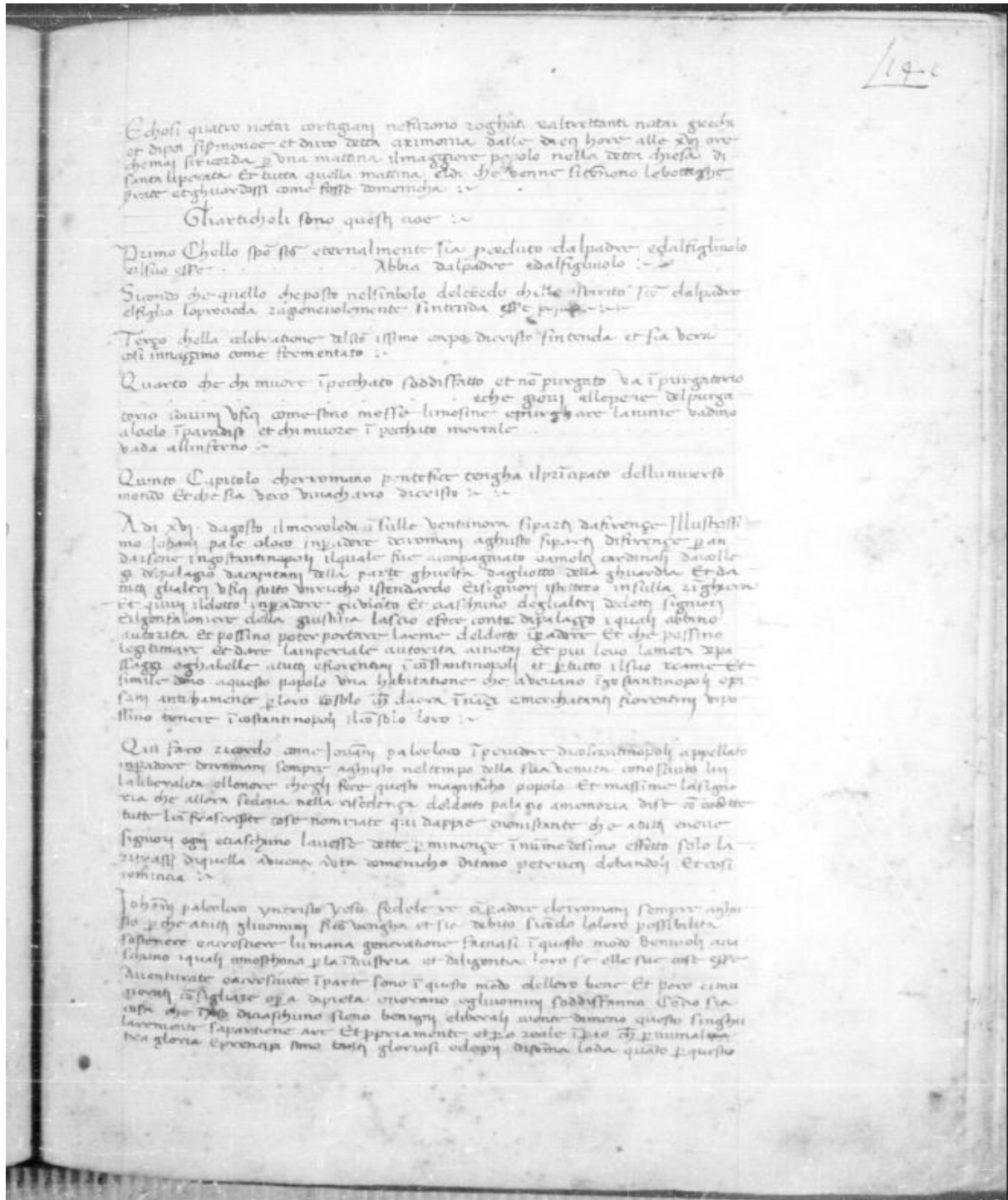
exemplified by Petriboni's account of the Council again shows an appreciation of less popular ideological models. This time the purpose is not to facilitate diplomatic understanding between the Greeks and the city, but to allow a sense of pride in Florentine achievements without being troubled by the ideological contractions which the patronage of a prince towards an elected representative of a monarch-less Republic inevitably produced. All this underlines the fact that Florentine ideology was a versatile tool, which, due to its richness, could be put to various purposes, both civic and personal. Finally, we might conclude that the catalyst which allows us to see the various subtle hues and practical uses of Florentine political ideology is an event characterised by many as a simple failure: the Council of Florence.

STUART M. MCMANUS

St Anselm Hall, University of Manchester

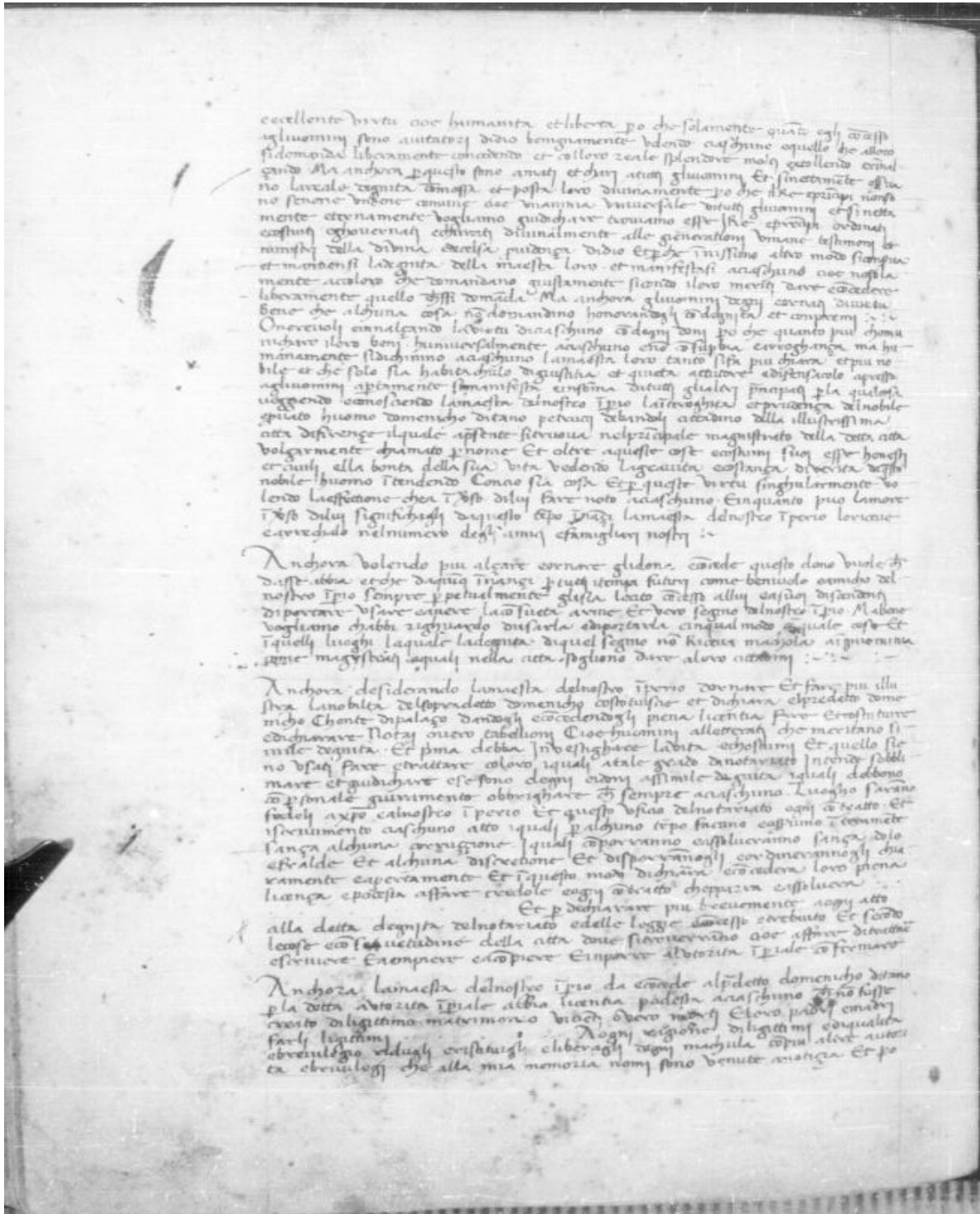
Appendices

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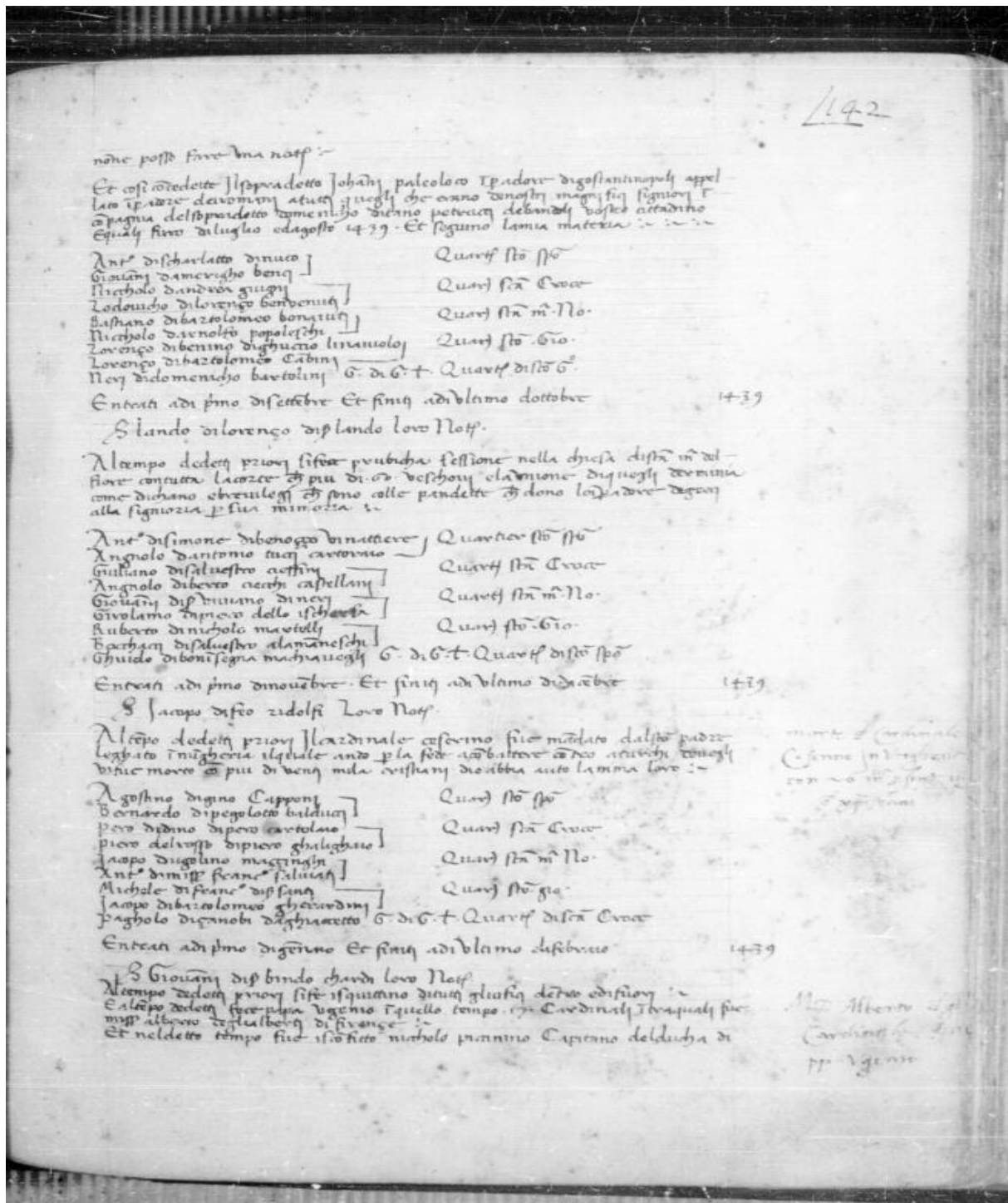
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Florence, BNCF, Conventi soppressi, C4 895 fol. 141v*



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Transcriptions

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[...]

Qui farò ricordo come Iouanni Paleolaco imperadore di Constantinopoli appellato imperadore dei romani sempre aghusto nel tempo della sua uenuta conosciuto lui la liberalità e ll'onore che gli fece questo magnifico popolo. Et massime la signoria che allora sedeua nella risedenza del detto palagio a memoria di sè concedette tutte le infrascripte cose nominate qui dappiè e nonostante che a tutti e noue signori ogni e ciaschuno l'auesse dette perminenze inn un medesimo effetto solo la ritrassi di quella auueua auta Domenicho di Tano Petrucci de' Bandoli. Et così comincia: :~

Iohanni paleolaco in Cristo Iesu fedele re e imperadore dei romani sempre aghusto perchè a tutti gli uomini si conuenga et sia debito, sicondo la loro possibilità, sostenere e acrestiere l'umana generatione facciasì in questo modo beniuoli a ciaschuno i quali conoscho per la industria et diligentia loro sè e lle sue cose essere auenturate e acresiute in parte sono in questo modo del loro bene et però rimunerati consigliare opera di pietà, onorano e gl'uomini soddisfanno con ciò sia cosa che inuerso di ciaschuno sieno benigni e liberali niente di meno questo singolarmente s'appartiene a re, et ppropriamente et però reale Imperio per num'al- (...) tra gloria e precipi sono tanti gloriosi e degni di somma loda quanto per questo

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eccellente uirtù cioè humanità et libertà però che solamente quanto egli concesso agli uomini sono aiutatori di Dio benignamente udendo ciaschuno e quello che a lloro si domanda liberamente concedendo e colloro reale splendore molti extollendo e rinnalzando. Ma anchora per questo sono amati e cari a tutti gli uomini. Et sù nettamente osseruano la reale dignità connessa et posta loro diuamente però che il Re e principi non sono se non e un bene comune cioè un'anima uniuersale di tutti gli uomini et sù nettamente eternamente uogliamo giudichare trouiamo essere i Re e precipi ordinati e costituiti e ghouernati e churati diuinalmente alle generationi umane testimoni et ministri della diuina ed ecelsa prudenza di Dio. Et perchè in nissiono altro modo si compua et mantiensi la

degnità della maestà loro et manifestasi a ciaschuno, cioè non solamente a coloro che domandano giustamente secondo i loro meriti dare e concedere liberamente quello che essi domanda. Ma anchora gli uomini degni e ornati di uirtù. Bene che alcuna cosa non domandino honorandogli con degnità et con premi :~ :~

Onoreuoli e innalzando la uirtù di ciaschuno con degni doni però che quanto più chomunicaro loro beni huiuersalmente a ciaschuno e non con superbia e arroganza ma humanamente si dichinino a ciaschuno la maestà loro, tanto si fa più chiara et più nobile et che sola sia habitachulo di giustitia et quietà a tutore e difensacolo apresso agli uomini apertamente si manifesta e insomma di tutti gli altri prencipati per la qualcosa ueggiendo e conoscendo la maestà del nostro Imperio la interoghità et prudenza del nobile e prouato huomo Domenico di Tano Petrucci de' Bandoli cittadino della illustrissima città di Firenze il quale a presente si truoua nel principale magnistrato della detta città uolgarmente chiamato per nome. Et oltre a queste cose e costumi suoi essere honesti et ciuili, e la bontà della sua uita uedendo la grauità e costanza di uerità di questo nobile huomo intendendo con ciò sia cosa et per queste uirtù singularmente uolendo la effectione che a in Christo di lui fare noto a ciaschuno e in quanto può l'amore in Christo di lui significagli da questo tempo. Innanzi la maestà del nostro Imperio lo riceue e arrechalo nel numero degli amici e famigliari nostri :~

Anchora uolendo più alzare e ornare gli doni e concede questo dono: uuole che da ssè abbia e che da quinci innanzi per tutti i tempi futuri come beniuolo e amicho del nostro Imperio sempre perpetualmente gli sia lecito concesso a lui e a' suoi discendenti di portare usare e auere la consueta arme et uero segno del nostro Imperio. Ma bene uogliamo ch'abbi righuardo d'usarla e di portarla e in qual modo e con quale cose et in quelli luoghi la quale la degnità di quel segno non riceua machola a ingniomenia come magistrati e quali nella città sogliono dare a loro cittadini :~ :~ :~

Anchora desiderando la maestà del nostro Imperio d'ornare et fare più illustra la nobilità del sopradetto Domenico costotuisce et dichiara el predetto Domenico chonte di palazzo dandogli e concedendogli piena licentia fare et costituire e dichiarare notai ouero tabellioni cioè huomini alletterati che meritano simile degnità. Et prima debba inuestigare la uita e chostumi et quello

sieno usati fare e trattare coloro i quale a tale grado di notariato intende sobblimare et giudichare e se sono degni e i doni a ssimile dignità i quali debbono con personale giuramento obbrighare che sempre a ciaschuno luogho saranno fedeli a Christo e al nostro Imperio. Et questo uficio del notariato ogni contratto et iscriuimento a ciaschuno atto i quali per alchuno tempo faccino e osseruino interamente senza alchuna corruzione i quali comporranno e assolueranno senza dolo e fralde et alchuna discretione. Et disporrannogli e ordinerannogli chiaramente e apertamente. Et in questo modo dichiara e concedeua loro piena licentia e podestà a ffare cicedole e ogni contratto che pparrà e assoluerà ***.

Et per dichiarare più breuemente a ogni atto alla detta dignità del notariato e delle leggie concesso trebiuto. Et secondo le cose e consuetudine della atta doue si trouerranno cioè a ffare di trattare e soruiere e aempiere e a compiere e imporre a l'utorità imperiale confermare.

Anchora la maestà del nostro Imperio dà e concede al predetto Domenicho di Tano per la detta autorità imperiale abbia licentia podestà a ciaschuno che non fusse creato di ligittimo matrimonio uiuenti ouero morti. E loro padri e madri farli ligittimi ***. A ogni ragione di ligittimi e di qualità e breuilegio ridugli e ristituigli e liberagli d'ogni machula con più altre autorità e briuilegi che alla mia memoria nomi sono uenute a notizia. E però

Florence, BNCF, Conventi soppressi, C4 895 fol. 142r

non ne posso fare una noti[tia] :~

[...]

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