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George Sphrantzes: A Brief Review

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When in 1786 and 1787 at Lausanne, Switzerland, Edward Gibbon was composing the sixth and final volume of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, he had at his disposal for the famous chapter on the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 a mere handful of sources. For the core of his narrative he drew upon three Greek works: Doukas' *Turko-Byzantine History*; Laonikos Chalkondylas' *Turkish History*; the larger of the two chronicles ascribed to the man now usually referred to as George Sphrantzes (Gibbon's Phranza); and upon the letter composed in Latin and addressed to Pope Nicholas V by Leonard of Chios, Latin archbishop of Mytilene on Lesbos, like Sphrantzes (and unlike Doukas and Chalkondylas) an established eyewitness to the siege. Not as yet available were two works that in the next century would come to enrich and refine the source material on Constantinople's fall. Of these, the first to be discovered was the diary (in Italian) of the Venetian ship's doctor, Nicolò Barbaro, an eyewitness to whom are owed precise dates for the course of the siege's events, the chronological framework to which the notices of the other sources must nowadays be fitted. The original manuscript of the *Giornale*, kept among the papers of the Barbaro family till 1829, came into the possession of the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice in 1837. It was edited by Enrico Cornet and published in Vienna in 1856.

1This piece was written in the early 1980s at the late Al. Oikonomides' request. It was to be a review article for *The Ancient World* (with Marios Philippides' translation of Sphrantzes, *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire: A Chronicle by George Sphrantzes*, 1401-1477 (The University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst 1980), as its point of departure. Also forthcoming at that time, but not yet available was Margaret Carroll's translation of Sphrantzes; this subsequently appeared as *A Contemporary Greek Source for the Siege of Constantinople 1453: The Sphrantzes Chronicle* (Hakkert: Amsterdam 1985; Carroll's Introduction is dated to 1978). This article got lost in the shuffle of *Ancient World* theme issues that began with those on Alexander the Great. Although it covers some of the same material as the introductions by Philippides and Carroll, its perspective and aims strike me as rather different from theirs, and it provides some details of antiquarian interest on the history of the Sphrantzes problem that they do not. These, I like to think, would have pleased Al., thereby rendering this presentation, stylistically revised but only marginally updated, an acceptable offering in his memory.


3Φωνερίγις was established as the original and authentic form of the name (instead of Φωνερίγις, the form that is standard especially in the manuscripts of the *Chronicon Maius*) by V. Laurent, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 44 (Festschrift Dölger) (1951) 373-78; cf. *Revue des études byzantines* 9 (1951) 170-71. For the name's spellings (and variant misspellings) in the manuscripts of Minas, see V. Grecu, "Das Memoirenwerk des Georgios Sphrantzes," *Actes du XIIe Congrès international d'études byzantines* (Belgrade 1964) 333 (hereafter cited as "Memoirenwerk").


5Barbaro, as to be expected, presents the story of the siege from a Venetian point of view. In addition to his chronological specificity (where other sources are frequently vague), his account is valuable, because of his peculiar vantage point, for naval maneuvers and encounters, for ship arrivals and departures. In addition, he provides lists of leading Italian, especially Venetian, participants and casualties (cf. Geoffroy de Villehardouin's interest in naming, insofar as he can recover them, the names of the Crusaders who engaged in the conquest of Constantinople two and a half centuries earlier). For a profitable employment of some of that information, see R. Browning, "A Note on the Capture of Constantinople in 1453," *Byzantium* 22 (1952) 379-87 (reprinted in *Studies on Byzantine History, Literature and Education* (Variorum Reprints: London 1977), chapter I).

6For brief summaries of the Barbaro and the (now to be mentioned) Kritovoulos discoveries, see Sir Edwin Pears, *The Destruction of the Greek Empire and the Story of the Capture of Constantinople by the Turks* (London 1903, repr. New York 1968) ix-xi.

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The second major discovery occurred in 1865 when Dethier found in the Seraglio Point Library in Istanbul a 16th-century codex containing a history of the reign of Mehmet II the conqueror, beginning in 1451, breaking off in 1467, composed by one "Kritovoulos the Islander," of Imbros, a Greek who came to the Ottoman civil service in the aftermath of the 1453 siege. It is a curious work, encomiastic toward Mehmet, rhetorical in tone, anachronistic in its geographical and tribal labels, conscious and imitative of its ancient Greek forerunners, especially Thucydides. Its special value is that it presents the events from an Ottoman perspective (though with clear sensitivity toward the Byzantine situation) by a writer with access to both Greek and Turkish witnesses to the events he describes. Also not available in Gibbon's day were the so-called Diary of the Polish Janissary by Michael Constantinovic, a Serbian, and the Slavic Chronicle; the Turkish sources, literary and archival, that loom increasingly important as testimonies of those times; and a variety of lesser records in Greek, Latin and Italian.

Thus the years since Gibbon's chapter was written have seen a great increase in source material on Constantinople's fall and a widening of its claims on the historian's linguistic range. Few scholars, even from among the specialists in the period, can be expected to master the full array of languages (and dialects) of the sources; much less so can this mastery be expected of the general medievalist, still less, of the general public. So it is that translations are essential for the general reader, useful to the historian, and important even for the specialist, particularly when they are based on recent critical editions and when they incorporate in their introductions and commentaries the results of scholarship to date.

Into this category falls the first English rendering of George Sphrantzes, by Marios Philippides, under the title The Fall of the Byzantine Empire: A Chronicle by George Sphrantzes, 1401-1477 (The University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst 1980). This translation, which includes Sphrantzes' Minor Chronicle (Chronicon Minus) complete and that portion of the Major Chronicle (Chronicon Maius) that is commonly referred to as the "siege-section," is based on V. Grecu's 1966 Bucharest edition. A general orientation on the history of the times and on Sphrantzes is provided in the introduction; more detailed points are taken up in the selective commentary notes at the back of the volume. A bibliography on the primary sources and on modern scholarship on Sphrantzes and his times is provided. A chronological list of salient events in Sphrantzes' life, line-drawn maps, tables of rulers, secular and religious, thumbnail sketches of the major participants—all serve to steer the reader through the welter of 15th-century events.

Welcome in itself, the translation is additionally welcome because it completes the series of English translations of major Greek and western eyewitness and contemporary non-eyewitness accounts of the siege of 1453 that till now included: Riggs's translation of Kritovoulos; Jones's translations of Barbaro's diary and of seven other contemporary siege accounts; and Magoulias's translation of Ducas (Doukas) in his entirety. Moreover, present-day interest in the Palaiologan period (which this translation helps to advance) is on the
increase. Despite accretions of newer source material, the older known writers have retained their importance. Of these, it is Sphrantzes who has most taxed scholars' ingenuity and has correspondingly experienced the greatest vicissitudes in the critical evaluation of the two chronicles traditionally attached to his name.14

The vicissitudes began when both chronicles fell, or seemingly fell, into oblivion after Sphrantzes' death (in or a few years after 1478).15 On rediscovery in the West, well over a century later, it was Maius that attracted earlier and greater notice. The number of surviving Maius manuscripts had no doubt raised the odds for its earlier rediscovery by bibliographers and manuscript-hunters.16 One of these, the Jesuit Latinist Jacobus Pontanus, found a manuscript of Maius, a chronicle whose narrative began "paolo supra annum Christi 1259," in the Bavarian Library in Munich; but rather than produce an edition of the Greek text, Pontanus, in 1604, produced an abridgement in Latin, omitting those portions of the Chronicle that he judged useless for history: the non-essential, the offensive; things like polemics on Mohammedanism, passages on the minutiae of Sphrantzes' own life, on meteorological portents, and on the schism between the Greek and Roman Churches.17 Nearly half a century later in his Diatriba de Georgiorum scriptis (1651), p. 426, Leo Allatios (Leone Allacci) mentioned that he had in his possession a Sphrantzes chronicle different from and shorter (it covered only the years from 1401 to 1477) than the chronicle previously known. He further mentions that he had compared this with a manuscript of the same work in the Library of the Monastery of the Holy Apostles in Naples. Although he raises the question of the authorship of Minus, Allatios is more interested in asking whether Minus was a compendium distilled from Maius, or whether instead Minus was the earlier work, an aide-mémoire for the later, larger work. In the latter case, Sphrantzes' authorship of the shorter work (his authorship of the larger work is unquestioned) is implicitly accepted; in the former case it is at least subject to some doubt ("nescio an ab ipso auctore").18


1This sentence, of course, suspends the problem of the authenticity of the chronicles ascribed as of old to Sphrantzes. For this vexed question and its implications, see the survey of scholarship below. The Maius text ends with a coda to the effect that Sphrantzes composed that chronicle in "old age and infirmity" at the request of certain prominent individuals of the island of Corfu and that it was completed on March 29, 1478. Philippides includes a translation of that paragraph on p. 95, at the closing of his translation of Minus, but with clear indication that it does not belong to it. For 1477 as Sphrantzes' possible year of death, see Grecu, "Memoirenwerk," 339. Cf. idem, "Georgios Sphrantzes. Leben und Werk," Byzantinolavica 26 (1965) 65-66 (hereafter cited as Grecu, "Sphrantzes").

16Manuscripts: cf. Moravesik, Byzantinioturcica (above, n. 14) 285; J. B. Papadopoulos, preface to Teubner edition of Maius, Books I and II (Leipzig 1935); V. Grecu's 1966 Bucharest edition and the same author's article, "Memoirenwerk," 327-41. There are still only five Minus manuscripts in existence, but more than twenty for Maius.

17Pontanus' birthname was Jakob Spanmüller (b.1542, d.1626). Brief biographical synopsis in Ludwig Koch, S.J., Jesuiten-Lexikon. Die Gesellschaft Jesu einst und jetzt (Paderborn 1934) 1453-54, though too loosely ascribing a first edition of Sphrantzes to Pontanus. For what Pontanus actually did with the Munich Sphrantzes manuscript, see Pontanus' own words as reproduced in Maius, vol. 156, 635-38; 1023-24; Grecu, "Memoirenwerk," 327, 330-32. Allatios mentions the same Minus manuscript again in his In Roberti Creightoni apparatum, versionem et notas ad historiam concilii Florentini (1665). Grecu, in the manuscript search for his critical edition of Minus, was unable to locate the Naples manuscript noted by Allatios. The manuscript Allatios records as being in his possession may be that now contained in the fourth fascicle of Codex Vallicellianus 172. Alternatively, Codex Vallicellianus 172, fasc. 4, may be a copy by Allatios himself of the manuscript (Codex Vaticanus Ottobonianus 260?—see next footnote) he mentions in his writings. Cf. Grecu, "Memoirenwerk," 330-32; "Sphrantzes," 67 n. 1. After his death, Allatios' papers and manuscripts were deposited in the library of the Oratory of Sancta Maria (Chiesa Nuova) in Vallicella, Rome (found by the Portuguese scholar Achilles Statius in 1581); see Petit, loc.cit. Allatios had for many years worked in the Vatican Library. The two Codices Vaticani Barberiniani Graeci that carry texts of Minus indicate they were made "Ex Codice MS Leonis Allatii." Cf. Grecu, "Memoirenwerk," 332.
Of the two alternatives presented by Allatios, the first editor of Minus, Johann Franz, in 1837, preferred the first: namely, that Minus was the more recent work, an epitome of Maius. His reasons are mainly stylistic. Minus seems more recent because its dialect is cruder, its style marred by a great deal of "verborum constructionisque perversitas." Franz raised the spectre of an anonymous Minus epitomator, but concluded that there was no reason to doubt Sphrantzes’ authorship: Sphrantzes simply exercised less care, employed a less perfect diction for the less important work. Minus was not likely ("certe non verisimile est") to have been written earlier and to have provided the raw material for Maius. Its value was seen primarily, even exclusively, as providing variant readings toward emending the text of Maius. The other of Allatios’s alternatives, that Minus was earlier and served as the basis out of which Maius was later elaborated, was resurrected in 1893 by the Russian scholar G. Destunis and adopted in Krumbacher’s history of Byzantine literature. Under either alternative, of course, the standing of Minus in the presence of Maius suffered: its materials almost entirely subsumed into Maius, its style and diction inferior to Maius’s, Minus could for historiographical purposes safely be ignored.

Destunis’s position was in 1932 questioned by J. B. Papadopoulos. In the course of preparing a critical edition of Chronicon Maius, Papadopoulos had been impressed by the number of places in which the text of Maius could be emended by reference to the text of Minus. That Minus could be of use in correcting Maius was, as the preceding paragraph indicates, not a new idea. What was new were the constructions Papadopoulos put upon it: that only Minus was authentic, that Maius was the work of a later compiler, responsible for introducing both telltale mistakes and various excursuses into the text of Minus. In his 1932 article, Papadopoulos comes close to, but stops short of, identifying the supposed compiler as a member of the prominent Melissenos family, a descendant of the Nikolaos Melissenos who figures in Maius as Sphrantzes’ beloved intended son-in-law, but who receives no mention in Minus.

That step was taken two years later in a paper delivered in 1934 by Papadopoulos at the Fourth International Congress of Byzantine Studies, held in Sofia, Bulgaria. There the compiler allegedly responsible for the many interpolations about the Melissenos family in Maius (such passages being notably absent from Minus) was identified as Makarios Melissenos, metropolitan of Monemvasia, who flourished in the latter part of the 16th century, down to his death in 1585. The reception of Papadopoulos’s paper was mixed, in some quarters even hostile. One distinguished Byzantinist went so far as to use the forum of a review of Papadopoulos’s 1935 Maius edition, where the subject is touched more by bibliographical reference and by inference than directly, to assail Papadopoulos’s 1934 Sofia paper. In that review, the Papadopoulos thesis is labeled imaginary, chimerical, overbold. The reviewer argues, inter alia, for the authenticity of the Melissenos passages in Maius and mentions the existence of an early 16th-century Maius manuscript, overlooked by Papadopoulos in his search and fatal to his assertion that there was in existence no Maius manuscript earlier in date than 1575. In short, the Papadopoulos thesis was seen as the exact reverse of the

19Franz’s edition (Rome 1837) in the series Classicorum auctorum e Vaticanis codicibus editorum, under the general editorship of Angelo Cardinal Mai, is based on Codex Vaticanus Ottobonianus Graecus 260, f. 113r-206v (manuscript described by Grecu, "Memoirenwerk," 328-29); reprinted in Migne, Patrologia graeca, vol. 156, 1023-80.
20Grecu, "Memoirenwerk," 327, misconstrues the crucial sentence.
21Which in 1837 indicated the 1796 Vienna edition of Maius by Carl Alter (available as a rare book at Northwestern University Library). Alter’s edition was based on the same Munich manuscript as Pontanus’ 1604 abridged Latin translation. In 1838 I. Bekker produced a new edition of Maius for the Bonn corpus, making use also of the readings of another manuscript, Parisiensis Regius, suppl. 80, which had been purchased for the Paris Library at Patrai in 1774 (see Bekker’s preface)—"Monacensi recentior" [its writing was completed in 1763] but "non deterior," in Bekker’s judgement.
24Published as "Phrantzes est-il réellement l’auteur de la Grand Chronique qui porte son nom?,” Actes du IVe Congrès international des études byzantines, Bulletin de l’Institut archéologique bulgare 9 (1935) 177-89.
25H. Grégoire, Byzantion 12 (1937) 385-91.
truth. Only Maius was affirmed as authentic; Minus was judged to be the product of an epitomator, composed well after Sphrantzes’ death, but still of use in helping to establish the text of Maius.26

It seems that in the wake of the withering attack Papadopoulos tacitly withdrew his claim that Maius was a complete forgery compiled by the wily metropolitan. He nevertheless clung to his belief in the priority of Minus, but now considered Maius to be an authentic work by Sphrantzes, a reworking of the vulgar Minus daybook into Maius with its literary and historical pretensions.27 In that compromise position he received the ready concurrence and assistance of the doyen of Byzantine diplomatic studies, Franz Dölger, who held that Maius was a reworking of Minus, substantially by Sphrantzes himself but (as Papadopoulos also insisted) subject to some significant “Melissenos-interpolations” in the sixteenth century, interpolations for which Makarios Melissenos was verifiably responsible.28 Papadopoulos’s position received further support from St. Binon in 1938.29 Then, in 1940, R.-J. Loenertz renewed the assault on Maius’s authenticity.30

Father Loenertz’ assault, partial at first, became comprehensive in 1946 with the publication of his article "Autour du Chronicon Maius attribué à Georges Phrantzès."31 In that article, Loenertz presented a detailed analysis of the structural components of the Maius text, the telltale signs of their patching together and their interpolations. Building on Papadopoulos’s work, but far extending it, he dissected the Maius prologue to demonstrate how it had been adapted from Minus to justify Maius’s grander program, with as little verbal alteration as possible, but with a reversal in the intention of Minus: The Maius prologue promised to recount the very events explicitly excluded from recounting by the Minus prologue. Loenertz detailed Maius’s use and occasional misunderstanding of Chalcondylas for events of 1360 to 1402, and its reliance, less in extent, but more significant in proving forgery, on the 16th-century so-called Chronicle of Dorotheos. He concluded by reasserting what Papadopoulos had first proposed in 1934, that the compiler of Maius was none other than Makarios Melissenos.

The case, at last well and fully made, prevailed. Many, including Philippides and Carroll, now accept that Makarios Melissenos was the "author" of Chronicon Maius; even those with doubts about the putative authorship are convinced ‘Maius is a forgery.32 This "new orthodoxy" has lifted Minus from the shadows of Maius. It now stands on its own to be evaluated in and for itself. Such assessment indicates Minus to be extremely valuable on several grounds. Among these is the constant flow of chronological data it provides: not just relative orderings of events, but many absolute dates (by day, by month, by season, by year), especially for such occasions as births, baptisms, marriages, and deaths in his own and in the imperial family, but also for transfers of imperial and patriarchal power, for arrivals in and departures from the capital, for plagues, treaties, and military operations. Such dates are so frequently given that they lead to the inescapable conclusion that Sphrantzes during his official career kept a diary that at some point later in his life constituted the raw material for the drafting of his "Memoirs," Chronicon Minus. It was not, however, a complete

26Questions of the Greek language (the demotic cast of Minus, the puristic cast of Maius) and their possible implications are also discussed. Reference is made to further arguments against the Papadopoulos thesis presented by V. Grumel in his review of Papadopoulos’s Maius edition in Échos d’Orient 40 (1937) 87-94. These include an argument based on the respective dating systems used in the Maius and Minus manuscripts, to which Papadopoulos replied in Byzantinische Zeitschrift 38 (1938) 324 (full bibliographical data on this article in next footnote).


29"L’histoire et la légende de deux chrysobullcs d’Andronice II en faveur de Monembasie. Macaire ou Phrantzès?,” Échos d’Orient 37 (1938) 274-311.


31Miscellanea G. Mercati, vol. III (Studi e Testi Vaticani 123) (Vatican City 1946) 273-311.

reworking of diary into memoirs because though many diary notices were expanded to a form more suitable for memoirs, many other diary notices seem to have been incorporated direct and unchanged into Minus. 33 Such briefer notices, though on the one hand disappointing, are on the other hand often refreshing; they contribute to the impression that Minus is a source that is not overly embellished and can therefore more readily be trusted.

That impression is further advanced by what is known or can be deduced about the credentials, character, purpose, and limits of the author:

Credentials: an intimate of, and relative by marriage to the Palaiologan household, Sphrantzes had a long career of government service, occasionally as an administrator, but more frequently as a roving ambassador to various and sundry places within and beyond (e.g., to Caucasian Georgia and to the court of the sultan) the pale of the Byzantine world. 34 His rewards were partly material, partly honorary, taking the form of court titles, including the one most commonly affixed to his name, protovestiarius, 35 "First Lord of the Imperial Wardrobe." 36

Character: generally straightforward and honest. His biases are patent and therefore easily taken into account. He is unswervingly loyal to the imperial household, implacably hostile to his court rival Loukas Notaras, the Grand Duke, 37 and his family.

Purpose and Limits: by and large autobiographical, to recount the events that occurred during his lifetime, and of these, only those of which he had accurate knowledge. This means that he often provides information only of those events he himself witnessed or participated in, that he is commendably reticent to write about what he has not seen. He is often most expansive when recounting some of the diplomatic episodes and conversations in which he personally shared.

If Minus, therefore, is now judged a valuable, though sometimes too brief, insider's account of the events leading up to and following Constantinople's fall, Maius has now fallen into that class of documents that Professor Allan Nevins would label "dubious." 38 It cannot be wholly dismissed from consideration. Its integrity is not entirely shattered, merely incomplete. Its pure metal must be extracted from the dross, initially through the process of source criticism initiated by Papadopoulos and Loenertz and now carried on by others. 39 Surprisingly, Philippides, while including in his book the Maius siege-section which he assigns to Makarios Melissenos, seems to have overlooked the series of articles by Margaret Carroll in which, following a suggestion by Loenertz at the end of his major article, 40 Sphrantzes' authorship of the siege-section is reasserted. 41

35 This title was awarded to him in 1432 and is appended to his name in the Minus prologue. In 1451, after touchy negotiations and in secretive circumstances, Constantine XI named him Grand Logothetes (cf. Philippides' translation, 64-69). For the episode and titles under consideration during those negotiations (and other contemporary court titles), see R. Guiland, "Le protovestiaries Georges Phrantzes," Revue des études byzantines 6 (1948) 48-57. Knowledge of that appointment was supposedly restricted to the emperor and to Sphrantzes and his immediate family. Perhaps because it was not more widely known, Sphrantzes contented himself with using protovestiarius in the title prefixed to Minus.
36 Philippides' translation, p. 22.
37 For whom, cf. Philippides' thumbnail sketch, 161.
38 For whom, see Grecu, "Sphrantzes," 66-67.
40 "Autour du Chronicon ...," cited in text above and in n. 31, suggesting (311) the possibility that Makarios in compiling Maius had at his disposal a version of Minus longer and more detailed than the one that has survived.
If Carroll is right, then there is even greater unity to the two separate selections—the entire Minus, the Maius siege account — included for translation in the Philippides volume. Whether she is right or wrong, continuing study of the Maius sources remains worthwhile and might now, in the wake of the diverse articles written on the subject, best be carried out in the framework of an extensive commentary on the Maius text.42

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42 See now, of course, Carroll’s translation of Maius, with introduction and commentary, cited above, n. 1.