



Summary :

Throughout the first century of the Palaiologan era, the intellectual life at Constantinople was exceptionally rich and productive. A circle of scholars took a leading part, supported by the emperor, the aristocracy and the Church. They were mainly occupied with teaching, but many of them were involved in the administration of the State and the Church. After the middle of the 14th century, because of the developments in economic, political and ecclesiastic matters, intellectual life entered a period of decline, with scarce bright exceptions, up until the Fall. Still, some of its aspects, especially the philological activity, would go on to influence the Italian Humanists and its legacy would be continued in the movement of Renaissance.

Date

End of 13th – 15th c.

Geographical Location

Constantinople

1. Introduction

In spite of the difficult political position of the Empire under the [Palaiologoi](#) and the immense financial problems the Byzantine State affronted, the intellectual life reached impressive heights, showing a significant productivity in every domain, which has often been associated with the Renaissance that was about to flourish in Italy the moment Byzantium was collapsing in the 15th century. However, as the scholars have noted, intellectual production was not even throughout the whole Palaiologan era. It flourished mainly from the late 13th until the mid-14th century, while later on there was a decline. This has mainly been explained as a by-product of the decline of the Byzantine economy, but it has also been associated with a less favorable intellectual climate after the [hesychastic controversy](#) and the prevalence of anti-secular, monastic circles within the Church.

2. Education

Education in Byzantium was all along organised in three cycles. The first cycle, the [hiera grammata](#), included reading, writing and some basic grammatical knowledge. It is believed that this cycle generally could be afforded by families of a certain financial status in the cities and some large villages, and was intended only for the male children. As far as [Constantinople](#) in that period is concerned, its existence is attested (by mentions to teachers), but we can not come to quantitative conclusions about the extent of the literacy.¹ The next cycle, the [enkyklios education](#) (general education) was relying on scholars who were teaching upon reward, and it was attainable to more wealthy social groups. Through letters, accounts, even satires, we get a glimpse of these teachers and their pupils' cycle. According to some information, Emperor [Michael VIII](#) wanted, after the [recapture of Constantinople](#) in 1261, to reestablish a public school of enkyklios education in Saint Paul's orphanage, an old foundation of [Alexios I Komnenos](#). It is not certain whether the attempt was successful and for how long this school survived. Similar information exists about the reestablishment of a "Patriarchal school", with the initiative of patriarch Germanos III (1265-66). It was not about a school of enkyklios education, but it was mainly intended for the further education of the clergymen. In that case as well, the outcome of this initiative was uncertain.² The higher cycle of education focused on philosophy, rhetoric and sciences, with which a group of distinguished scholars were preoccupied. Their pupils were the descendants of the aristocracy, as well as talented young men from middle class, who desired to make a career as scholars. Higher education like that was not only paid for by the pupils, but it was also funded by the State, which was traditionally interested in supporting the education of persons who would go on to become high administration officials. During the Palaiologan period there weren't any permanent posts for salaried teachers, as there had been in earlier periods, but some scholars could secure indirect state support by means of some revenue allowed to them or a court office.³ Others could hold ecclesiastical offices, even become bishops. There were teachers who lived and taught in imperial monasteries of Constantinople (another indirect way to secure their livelihood). In general, the range of the financial position of scholars in this period varied from wealthy state functionaries to simple teachers on the verge of poverty.



The first known teacher of the higher level after 1261 was [George Akropolites](#), with whom starts a series of scholars - teachers; most famous among them were [George of Cyprus](#) and [Maximos Planoudes](#) in the 13th century. We know some 30 names of scholars who were involved in a way or another with educational activity (not necessary in the highest level) in Constantinople until the fall of the Empire.⁴

3. Philological and copying activity

The biggest contribution the Constantinopolitan scholars of the Palaiologan period have made to the European civilization lies not so much in their original works, but rather in that they preserved and studied a very large part of the Ancient as well as the Medieval Greek literature. The protagonists of the Palaiologan Renaissance were not interested solely in enriching their libraries with new copies of the Greek writers; they also worked on the reconstruction of ancient texts, thus laying the foundations for textual philology editing. A large part of Greek literature works have been preserved in 13th-15th-century manuscripts. Certainly it was of great importance the fact that the interest and the activity of Byzantine scholars could be pursued with no interruptions in 15th-century Italy, where these scholars found pupils, employers and buyers for their books in the Humanists' cycles. Furthermore, in order to facilitate the learning of Greek and the study of classical authors, they composed grammars, commentaries and paraphrases.

A few examples of Byzantine philologists of that period include Maximos Planoudes (end of 13th c.), who among other things published the works of Plutarch and an anthology of Greek epigrams; his pupil Manuel Moschopoulos; [George Pachymeres](#), [Theodore Metochites](#) and [Nikephoros Gregoras](#) (14th c.); John Chortasmenos and [George Chrysokokkes](#) (15th c.), not to mention scholars who lived in other cities of the Empire.⁵

4. Mathematics and astronomy

Arithmetic and geometry, along with their relative sciences, astronomy and music theory, constituted the **Quadrivium** of the sciences taught in the highest level of education. Some scholars of the Palaiologan era, however, did not confine themselves to the teaching of ancient authorities, but engaged in compiling original commentaries on these authorities, and in some cases they went as far as to suggest a break with tradition. Maximos Planoudes, for example, suggested the adaptation of the [Indian \(namely the "Arabic"\)](#) numerals in arithmetic,⁶ while Nikephoros Gregoras suggested the correction of the Julian calendar two centuries before its adaptation in the West.⁷ The astronomer [Gregory Chioniades](#) (end of 13th c.) realized how astronomy had progressed in Medieval Islam and traveled as far as Persia to study the Arab-Persian tradition, which he finally incorporated into his work.⁸ George Pachymeres was occupied with mathematics, as were Nikolaos Rabdas and Manuel Moschopoulos, while Theodore Metochites devoted himself to the study of astronomy. His pupil, Nikephoros Gregoras, actually attributed to Metochites the revival of astronomy after a long period of neglect for this science. Another distinguished astronomer is [Theodore Meliteniotes](#) (mid-14th c.).⁹ The most well-known author on music theory is Manuel Bryennios (around 1300), who wrote a treatise under the title "Harmonica" (Harmonics). Treatises on physics, on optic and on other natural sciences have also been preserved. It is a legitimate conjecture that the quality and the originality of the Byzantine scholars' work on sciences could have laid the foundations for a significant progress in this domain, but this aspect of their activity, in contrast to their philological activity, never had an appeal in the West, where it remained relatively unknown, and thus was never continued.

5. Philosophy

In the medieval world, philosophy was closely attached to theology. The non-theological aspect of philosophical activity at Byzantium was mainly the study and the commentaries of ancient philosophy, especially Aristotle, Plato and the **Neo-Platonists**. The study of Aristotle was especially popular, among other things for educational purposes; the most famous commentators before the mid 14th century were [Manuel Holobolos](#), John Pothos Pediasimos and above all George Pachymeres.¹⁰ Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophy were looked at with distrust by the Church, yet at the beginnings of the 14th century Theodore Metochites studied them profoundly and exchanged with Nikephoros Choumnos arguments for and against Platonic and Aristotelian theories, within the



framework of their well-known dispute, foreshadowing the subsequent dispute between Platonists - Aristotelians.¹¹ A little earlier, Maximos Planoudes had translated from Latin the work "De consolacione philosophiae" (On the consolation of philosophy) of the 6th-century Christian Neoplatonic philosopher Boethius, Nikephoros Gregoras seems to have been an admirer of the Platonic philosophy.

Until the fourth decade of the 14th century the secular philosophy overshadowed theology, though many treatises were written, basically on the issues that caused the dispute with the Catholics, as for example on the procession of the Holy Spirit. However, around the middle of the century the [hesychastic controversy](#), that is the dispute around the views of Gregory Palamas, dominated the philosophical debates and involved the most eminent scholars of those days.¹² Palamas, who lived only for a short period at Constantinople, tried, in reply to the criticism of Barlaam of Calabria, to provide philosophical support for the practice of meditation which, already before the end of the 13th century, had become particularly popular among certain monks, who sought for a mystical experience of direct contact with the divine. Palamas' position that God's essence is approachable through a mystical way and not through the intercession of logic caused the reaction of Gregory Akindynos in the first place, and of the most distinguished philosopher of Constantinople, of Nikephoros Gregoras, later on. The condemnation of Palamas' opponents by the Church after 1347 made the philosophers more reluctant to participate in theological issues, while some of them kept themselves at a distance from the orthodox Church. The interest in Aristotelism was refreshed in Byzantium during the second half of the 14th century, after Demetrios Kydones had translated the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas, whereas Platonism found its new most eminent exponent in the person of the Neo-Platonist Plethon (George Gemistos), who lived and taught in 15th-century Constantinople, before he finally left for the court of Mystras.¹³ Plethon traveled to Italy for the Synod of Ferrara-Florence (1439). In Italy he made a significant contribution to the development of Neoplatonism among the Humanists, while his dispute with the Aristotelian George Scholarios is famous. Plethon's Neoplatonism went as far as suggesting the abandonment of Christianity and the adaptation of a religious system inspired by ancient religion, with the establishment at the same time of a utopian Republic described in his *Book of Laws*; a book destroyed after his death, upon the order of Scholarios who had been appointed patriarch in the meantime.

Although the late Byzantine philosophy would not claim some significant role in the evolution of the European thought, it is worth observing that it had escaped from the barren commentary of the ancient philosophers, and in some cases it tended to elude the rigid frame imposed by the Christian creed. Furthermore, some thinkers tended to integrate their problems in the wider trends being developed in Western Europe. Their most important heritage is perhaps the spread of the Platonic philosophy throughout Italy, where it found ardent supporters among the Humanists. Besides Plethon, it is worth mentioning the contribution of the Constantinopolitan teacher John Argyropoulos, who after the [Fall](#) had settled and taught in Florence. On entirely different wavelength, George Palamas' mystical theology influenced for many centuries the theological thought in the Greek regions, as well as in the entire Orthodox world.

6. Rhetoric

The rhetoric at Byzantium, as far as the composition and the language are concerned, followed strict rules which had already been formed during Antiquity, and in general it was not marked out for its originality. Rhetoric texts (laudatory, advisory and funeral oration) were written in order not so much to be delivered (although this did happen), as to be read, and their basic aim was the demonstration of its composer's abilities to adapt themselves to the given standards.¹⁴ Yet a more careful reading of them by most recent studies showed that, during the later period, there are cases where the rhetoric texts express original views, philosophical or political ones.¹⁵ Speeches were written by most of the scholars of that period. Although perhaps the most eminent orator, Thomas Magistros, lived at Thessalonica, among the authors of Constantinople we might discern the orations of Manuel Holobolos, of Nikephoros Chounos, of Theodore Metochites, of Demetrios Kydones, or, from the last decades before the Fall, of [Manuel II](#), of Isidore of Kiev, and of others.

7. Epistolography

For the Byzantine scholars epistolography was not only a private issue; the gathering and the publication of their epistles was a way to show off their aptitude in the use of the language, just as the composition of speeches was, as well as their knowledge of the classical



texts, extracts from which they lavishly cited.¹⁶ Many a collection of letters survive from the Palaiologan era (we should mention, for example, those of George of Cyprus, of Maximos Planoudes, of [Michael Gabras](#), of Manuel Gavalas, of Demetrios Kydones). Though valuable sources for the historians, their esthetic interest is for most of the modern readers non-existing.

8. History

During the Palaiologan period four big historiographies were written, unequal as far as their value is concerned, although three of the historians (George Akropolites, George Pachymeres and Nikephoros Gregoras) were perhaps the most distinguished scholars of their days each, while the fourth one (John Kantakouzenos) was the main protagonist of the events he was describing.¹⁷ Their value as a source let aside, the history of Pachymeres surely presents the most interest, since it is more than an attempt to present an embellished version of the events for political reasons (as it happens in all three other cases) and seeks the deeper causes of the events the author was experiencing. In the end, his interpretation is focused on personalities, since he attributed the empire's evils during the end of the 13th and the beginnings of the 14th century to Michael's VIII political amoralism and to [Andronikos' II](#) well-intentioned lack of will, yet he took care to put them within a wide geographical context, from the [Mongolic empire](#) until the Western Europe, something that is indicative of the extroversive spirit that characterized Byzantine intellectual environment for the first time in this era. On the other hand, between the first and the sixth decade of the 14th century, as well as from 1370 until the end of the empire, histories were not written any more at Constantinople¹⁸ and our information presents hardly-replaceable gaps, in spite of the existence of some short chronicles, as well as of a narration about the [siege of Constantinople in 1422](#).

9. Literature

Given that the scholarly Byzantine literature mainly served educational and showy ends, its esthetic was indifferent for virtues such as originality, sincerity and a direct tone. Besides, because of the language as well, most of the literary texts were accessible only for the educated people, who had the means to estimate these more or less indifferent to the modern reader works. A characteristic example of scholarly poetry from the Palaiologan period are the epigrams and other poems of Manuel Philes, closely related to the needs of the aristocratic society (e.g. funerary or votive inscriptions).¹⁹ There is, however, a late Byzantine literary production written in popular language, aiming at delight and addressed not only to the [aristocracy](#), but to the middle classes as well, especially after the mid-14th century.²⁰ It includes romances (Kallimachos and Crhysorrhoe, Belthandros and Chrysantza, Libistros and Rhodamne), as well as adaptations of similar French and Italian works, parodies-satires (such as the *Ακολουθία του Σπανού* [The acolythy of the Beardless], the *Παιδιόφραστος διήγησις ζώων των τετραπόδων* [Narration of the four-legged animals], the *Επιδημία Μάζαρι εν Αιδου* [Mazaris in Hades], the *Καταβλαττάς*, the *Συναξάρι του γαδάρου* [Synaxarium of an Ass] etc), pseudeo-historical poems (History of Belisarios, History of Alexander). Although it is not certain, many of these works must have been created in the multi-ethnic Palaiologan Constantinople. It is a tradition which corresponds to the west-European literary trends, and would survive after 1453, especially in the Latin-occupied territories, essentially constituting the beginnings of the modern Greek literature.

10. Evaluation

Perhaps it is not right to think of this intellectual movement as the first stage of a Renaissance that never finally bloomed in Byzantium. We observe, however, that the scholars in the late Byzantine Constantinople were distinguished not only for the extent and the thoroughness of their education, but also for their interest, unique in Byzantium, in being instructed by other civilizations and exploring new directions. The collapse of their traditional means of financial support, mainly the emperor and the aristocracy, from the middle of the 14th century onwards, led this short but amazing bloom to decay. At least one aspect of the scholars' work, the preoccupation with ancient literature, was able to be transferred and form a legacy in the West, where it contributed to the wider and complex phenomenon of the Renaissance

1. For the 13th-century literacy (with evidence from Asia Minor), see Oikonomides, N. «Literacy in Thirteenth-Century Byzantium: An Example from Western Asia Minor» in Langdon, J. et al. (eds.), *ΤΟ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟΝ. Studies in Honor of Speros Vryonis Jr.* (New Roselle 1993), pp. 253-265. For reports on teachers, see Mergiali, S., *L'enseignement et les lettrés pendant l'époque des Paléologues (1261-1453)* (Athens 1996), pp. 27-29.



2. We see the titles of this school's tutors (tutor of the Gospel, of the Psalter and of the Apostle), but we can not exclude the possibility that, as it happened with many titles during this period, they had an honorary character and were not associated with a specific position in some organized school. See Mergiali, as above, pp. 32-33. In favor of the existence of the school Constantinides, C. N., *Higher Education in Byzantium in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries (1204 - ca.1310)* (Nicosia 1982), pp. 59-65.
3. Some high-ranking title-holders of the administration were at the same time occupied in teaching, such as George Akropolites (PLP 518) or Theodore Metochites (PLP 17982).
4. Mergiali, S., *L'enseignement et les lettrés pendant l'époque des Paléologues (1261-1453)* (Athens 1996), pp. 246-247.
5. Wilson, N. G., *Οι λόγιοι στο Βυζάντιο*, trans. N. Κονομής (Athens 1991), pp. 293-344; Ševčenko, I., «Τα γράμματα και οι τέχνες την εποχή των Παλαιολόγων», in Mango C. (ed.), *Πανεπιστήμιο της Οξφόρδης: Ιστορία του Βυζαντίου*, trans. Καραγιώργου Ο. (Athens 2006), pp. 380-391, esp. 381-385; C.N. Constantinides, *Higher Education*, pp. 137-148 (for the libraries and the editions).
6. Ψηφοφορία κατ' Ἴνδούς, ed. Gerhardt, C.J., *Das Rechenbuch des Maximus Planudes* (Eislebes 1865).
7. Ševčenko, I., «Τα γράμματα και οι τέχνες την εποχή των Παλαιολόγων», in C. Mango (ed.), *Πανεπιστήμιο της Οξφόρδης: Ιστορία του Βυζαντίου*, trans. Ο. Καραγιώργου (Athens 2006), pp. 386.
8. Pingree, D., «Gregory Chioniades and Palaeologan Astronomy», *DOP* 18 (1964), pp. 133-60.
9. Constantinides, C. N., *Higher Education in Byzantium in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries (1204 - ca.1310)* (Nicosia 1982), pp. 156 ff.
10. Constantinides, C. N., *Higher Education in Byzantium in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries (1204 - ca.1310)* (Nicosia 1982), pp. 117-132; Hunger, H., *Βυζαντινή λογοτεχνία*, trans. Μπενάκης Λ. et al. (Athens 1987-1994), vol. I, pp. 66-69, 85-91; Τατάκης, Β., *Η βυζαντινή φιλοσοφία*, trans. Καλπουρτζή Ε. (Athens 1977), pp. 216-243.
11. Ševčenko, I., *Études sur la polémique entre Theodore Métochite et Nicéphore Choumnos* (Bruxelles 1962).
12. Meyendorff, J., *Ο Άγιος Γρηγόριος ο Παλαμάς και η Ορθόδοξη μυστική παράδοση*, trans. Μάϊνας Ελ. (Athens 1990); Beck, H.-G., «Humanismus und Palamismus», *XIII Congrès International des Études Byzantines*, 3 (Beograd 1961), pp. 63-82.
13. Woodhouse, C. M., *George Gemistos Plethon: The Last of the Hellenes* (Oxford 1986).
14. Hunger, H., *Βυζαντινή λογοτεχνία*, trans. Μπενάκης Λ. et al. (Athens 1987-1994), vol. I, p. 126 ff.
15. See Angelov, D., *Imperial Ideology and Political Thought in Byzantium (1204-1330)* (Cambridge – New York 2007); a different evaluation of the political working-out of the rhetoric by Κιουσοπούλου, Τ., Βασιλεύς ή οικονομός. Πολιτική εξουσία και ιδεολογία πριν την άλωση (Athens 2007), pp. 163-200.
16. See Hunger, H., *Βυζαντινή λογοτεχνία*, trans. Μπενάκης Λ. et al. (Athens 1987-1994), vol. I, pp. 323-348.
17. Hunger, H., *Βυζαντινή λογοτεχνία*, trans. Μπενάκης Λ. et al. (Athens 1987-1994), vol. II, pp. 282-326.
18. On the assumption that John Chortasmenos composed at the end of the 14th century a history lost nowadays, see ; Hunger, H., *Βυζαντινή λογοτεχνία*, trans. Μπενάκης Λ. et al. (Athens 1987-1994), vol. II, p. 335.
19. *Manuelis Philae Carmina*, ed. Miller, E. (Paris 1855-57, repr. Amsterdam, 1967).
20. Beck, H.-G., *Ιστορία της βυζαντινής δημόδους λογοτεχνίας*, trans. N. Eideneier (Athens 1988), p. 191 ff.; Beaton, R., *Η ερωτική μυθιστορία του ελληνικού Μεσαίωνα*, trans. Ν. Τσιρώνη (Athens 1996).



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	Hunger H. , <i>Βυζαντινή λογοτεχνία. Η λόγια κοσμική γραμματεία των Βυζαντινών, 2: Ιστοριογραφία, Φιλολογία, Ποίηση</i> , Μ.Ι.Ε.Τ., Αθήνα 1992, Κόλιας, Τ. – Συνελλή, Κ. – Μακρή, Γ.Χ. – Βάσσης, Ι. (μτφρ.)
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	Ševčenko I. , "Τα γράμματα και οι τέχνες την εποχή των Παλαιολόγων", Mango C. (επιμ.), <i>Πανεπιστήμιο της Οξφόρδης: Ιστορία του Βυζαντίου</i> , Αθήνα 2006, 380-391, Καραγιώργου, Ο. (μτφρ.)

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Glossary :

	enkyklios education The secondary education in Byzantium. The students, from 12 years old, were taught grammar, rhetorics and eloquence.
	hiera grammata (lit. holy writings, i.e. the Scripture) The term denotes the elementary education in Byzantium. Pupils began in the age of six years old and were taught reading from the Scriptures and basic math operations by a private tutor.
	Neoplatonism A philosophical school that was prevalent from the 3rd to the 6th c. AD. it was founded and elaborated mainly by Plotinus (204/205-



269/270). Through Neoplatonism, which reformulated and epitomized many aspects of ancient Greek thought, a form of Platonism survived, with many influences of Orphism and the Pythagorians, in such a way, that classical philosophy appeared to give way to metaphysics. Neoplatonic schools thrived in Alexandria, Pergamos, Syria and Athens. Among the main Neoplatonic philosophers were Proclus in the school of Athens and Olympiodorus and Hypatia in the school of Alexandria.

quadrivium

The quadrivium comprised the four mathematical subjects (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy) that were taught as a necessary part of higher education in Byzantium.

Quotations

Maximos Planoudes on numbers

Around 1300 Maximos Planoudes composed his treatise *The So-called Great Calculation according to the Indians*, in which he suggested the use of the Indian (i.e. Arabic) numerals in arithmetic and introduced the use of zero. Maximos Planoudes had studied the treatise «Great Calculation according to the Indians», written in 1252 by an unknown author, which he had borrowed by George Bekkos, as is gathered from the following extract of a letter of his.

Ἐμοὶ δὲ καὶ ταυτὶ μὲν γράφεται· τὸ δὲ πλεόν ἐκάστης ἡμέρας, ἐξ οὗ τὴν βίβλον ἦν ἴστε παρ' ὑμῶν ἐχρησάμην, ὁ κατ' Ἰνδοῦς ἀριθμὸς δαπανᾷ καὶ θεοῦ διδόντος ἤδη τὸ πᾶν ἤνυσται. καὶ με οὐδὲν διέδρα τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ, πλὴν καὶ ταῦτα προσθεῖναι τῇ γραφομένῃ μοι βούλομαι βίβλω· πῶς, οὐτινοσοῦν ἀριθμοῦ δοθέντος μὴ τετραγώνου, τὸν ἔγγιστα τούτου δυνατὸν εὐρεθῆναι τετράγωνον; καὶ ἔτι· πῶς, οὐτινοσοῦν ἀριθμοῦ τετραγώνου δοθέντος, τὴν αὐτοῦ πλευρὰν εὐρεῖν οἷόν τ' ἂν γένηται; εἰ δὴ ταῦτα τῶν ὑμετέρων που βιβλίων ἐντέτακται ἢ καὶ ἄλλως ἔστιν ὑμᾶς εἰδέναι, εὐκταῖα ἂν ἐμοὶ δράσαιτε, εἰ γράψαντες πέμψαιτε.

Maximos Planoudis, *Letters*, 46.35-45, ed. P. L. M. Leone, *Maximi Monachi Planudis Epistulae* (Classical and Byzantine Monographs 18, Amsterdam 1991).