ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΜΕΙΖΟΝΟΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΣΜΟΥ

Authoring : *Moustakas Konstantinos*
Translation : *Τσοκανή Άννα*
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Summary :

One of the last Byzantine historians, state official, associate of the last three Byzantine emperors and writer of the *Chronicon Minus* that records the Fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans.

Other Names

Georgios Sfrantzis, Brother Grigorios

Date and Place of Birth

1401, Limnos or Constantinople

Date and Place of Death

1477, Corfu

Main Role

Scholar, historian, state official

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1. Introduction

Georgios Frantzis or Sfrantzis (as is the most accurate version of his name) is one of the last Byzantine historians. He belongs to the so-called “Historians of the Fall” generation, alongside Doukas, Chalkokondylis and Kritovoulos: they were all contemporaries of the outstanding incident of Fall the Constantinople and the final fall of Byzantium, which they all present in their work.[1] Frantzis from a young age and until the Fall of Constantinople served as a state official and associate of the last three Byzantine emperors, being an especially close associate and friend of Constantine XI Palaiologos. This avocation provided him with the necessary information in order to proceed, later on, with his historiographical venture. His body of work constitutes a brief chronicle-memoirs, while he has been also associated with a larger and more extended chronicle, one that has been proved to be pseudonymous, in which his short chronicle is fully incorporated.

2. Life and activity

What we know about the life and activity of Georgios Frantzis comes from his work itself, which is written in a self-related manner within the memoir genre and, consequently, provides useful information about the writer’s personage and career. As he mentions in his text, he was born in 1401 and lived at least until 1477, year until which his narrative is extended. Concerning his familial origin, most of the data regard his mother Thomais, whom he seems to greatly appreciate and constantly refers to as “holy”. In particular, he states that she was an orphan girl of Asian Minor stock, taken in by the Kavasilas family of Salonika. After the first occupation of Salonika by the Ottomans (1378), Thomais moved to Limnos, where Frantzis’ grandfather, appreciating her character and virtues, selected her as his daughter-in-law.[2]

This is his only reference to his paternal lineage. The presence of his paternal family in Limnos, at least during that specific time, has led to the hypothesis that Frantzis was of Limnian origin; in can not be sure, however, whether their presence on the island meant that they were indigenous or that they had found themselves in Limnos on the occasion of his grandfather’s placement as some kind of state official. His place of birth also remains uncertain, either Limnos or Constantinople; nor is his father’s name known, although it could have been Ioannis, since Georgios gave that name to his first-born son. His father’s side of the family was distinguished and some of its members had been appointed to administrative positions,[3] a fact that explains Georgios’ decision, from an early age, to join the imperial court. One of his two brothers was also in imperial service, while the other one served as a monk at the Charsianitis monastery. He also had a sister, who died alongside her husband and child in a 1416 epidemic.[4]

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In 1438 Frantzis got married to Eleni, daughter of Alexios Palaiologos Tzamblakonas, with whom he had five children, Ioannis, Alexios, Thamar, and two more boys who died in infancy. All his children, however, passed away before him and in a young age. His son Alexios died by an epidemic, while Ioannis and Thamar were enslaved during the Fall of Constantinople and, subsequently, bought by the sultan in order to join his service and harem respectively, alongside other offspring of noble Byzantine families. Both breathed their last within the sultan's palace; Ioannis was executed because he was suspected of planning to kill the sultan, while Thamar succumbed to some kind of epidemic disease.[5]

Frantzis joined the imperial service in 1416-17 as a courtier during the reign of emperor Manuel II Palaiologos and, some time later, became *protovestiaritis* (captain of the imperial guard). Later on, when Constantine Palaiologos ascended to the throne, Frantzis was appointed great *logothetis*. Frantzis had been a close associate of the last Byzantine Emperor since 1427, when Constantine had been named despot of Morea (Peloponnese). He stayed in Peloponnese with Constantine Palaiologos for the long time the latter ruled the area, undertaking mainly diplomatic duties, while he also served as head (governor) of Patras and Mystras.[6] He returned to Constantinople in 1448 following the, by then, emperor Constantine and was soon sent on an ambassadorial mission in Trabzon and Iberia (Georgia) in order to negotiate a wedding for the Byzantine Emperor and one of the daughters of the local royal families.[7] That mission lasted two years. With his return, Frantzis found himself in Constantinople at the eve of the Ottoman grand assault. Since he was in the city during both the siege and the Fall, he played an active part in organizing its defense. After the Fall, himself and all of his family was captivated. He was ransomed and soon released, as well as his wife, but not his children. Next stop in Frantzis' life was the Peloponnese, where he clung to the entourage of the despot Thomas Palaiologos, until the Ottomans conquered the area (1460). Subsequently, he fled to Venetian-occupied Corfu, where he remained for the rest of his life having abandoned the worldly interests and living from then on as a monk under the name Grigorios.

Concerning the major political issue of his time, ie the conflict between those supporting the religious union of the Catholic and Orthodox Church and those opposing it, Frantzis appears distanced, and could be described as a moderate anti-unionist. As he himself states, he did not consider the matter as important as most of his contemporaries, and was rather indifferent to the doctrinal issues, even though, as he puts it, he did not think he should revise the traditional faith.[8] Writing ex post facto and given the knowledge of how things turned out eventually, he negatively assessed the religious union established in the Councilof Ferrara-Florence, not because of doctrinal but political and strategic reasons: the declared union did not ensure any kind of help for Byzantium, while, at the same time, it was the main reason the Ottoman hostility was manifested, resulting to the Fall of Constantinople. His assessment was based on the theory that the union was perceived by the Turks as a provocative and disconcerting move, leading to a preemptive strike against Constantinople before the arrival of any sizable help from the West.[9] Despite his anti-unionist stand, however, Frantzis positively assesses and, more or less, praises the last two (unionist) Byzantine Emperors.

3. Historiographical work

Any assessment on Frantzis' work can only be based on the text he has certainly written himself, meaning the so-called *Chronicon Minus*. The more detailed and extended *Chronicon Maius*, that was also attributed to Frantzis, has been proved to be a pseudonymous piece of work and a posterior compilation, whose author is generally accepted to be Makarios Melissinos, the metropolitan of Monemvasia during the second half of the 16th century. Frantzis' relation to *Chronicon Maius* is still under examination. On the one hand it is argued that Frantzis had not only composed *Chronicon Minus*, whish, essentially, is a kind of personal journal or brief notes, but also wrote an extended text on which Melissinos worked at later on, completing and amending it. On the other hand it is supported that Frantzis had not written the extended text and that Melissinos composed *Chronicon Maius* compiling information from different antecedent sources and incorporating whole passages from *Chronicon Minus*.[10]

Frantzis is not known as author of any other written work with the exception of his historiographical text, and cannot at any rate be ranked among the esteemed scholars of his time. Regarding structure and narrative, his text does not follow the usual form of Byzantine historiography, since it is, essentially, a self-related composition of brief information in chronological order. It lacks an introduction in which the author's view and motives for the composition would be exposed. Frantzis, obviously, proceeded with his

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auctorial venture not out of some scholarly impulsion, but embarking from his wish to share his experience as a state official and imperial associate.

The thematic core of the narration lays within his own life and actions, hence the emphatic and extensive disparity when referring to the main events and twists of his time, according to his presence and level of participation. Characteristically, his long residence at the Peloponnese means that he especially focuses on what was happening there, while important developments taking place in Constantinople at the same time are hardly, or even not at all, commended upon. Another example is his mission in Trabzon and Iberia in other to negotiate a royal wedding. His presence there and the emphasis on writing all the details of this particular piece of business result into no account of the situation in Constantinople during the crucial period after the Councilof Ferrara-Florence and before the grand final Ottoman assault.

Franrtzis is the only one out of the four historians of the Fall who was present during both the siege and the conquest. Oddly enough, his presence is not exploited to elaborately describe the event, since his is the briefest, on the verge of epigrammatic, account of the facts in comparison to the other historians. The objectivity of his report can only be checked regarding the fact he fully downgrades the participation of allied forces from the West and the Greek lands under Venetian and Latin rule.[11] A useful and interesting piece of information provided concerns the number of indigenous defenders of Constantinople (4,773), a fact that can be considered quite credible, since it was him who had been assigned with the task to register those among the city's residents able to bear arms.[12] The time of his captivity is also mentioned very briefly, since he provides his reader with no other detail except that it was short.

The fact that he composed or elaborated his work in an advanced age, when he had become a monk, does not affect his view, except for a few stereotypical expressions, such as the one in the beginning of the text where he states that it would be best not to have been born.[13] The base of his historical reasoning is totally secular and the model of divine wrath and punishment for the sins committed by the Byzantines, so eminent in the work of Doukas, is completely absent. The religious union between the two churches is considered to be the main for the Ottoman assault on Constantinople, a decision assessed as a strategic error of the Byzantine Emperor who pushed the Ottyomans to assume preemptive action. Despite the tragic incidents marking his life, namely not only the loss of his country but his children as well, Frantzis does not allow any kind of emotion to affect his writing. Consequently, his text is not dominated by the sentimental charges and dramatisation of Doukas. Moreover, the language he uses is simple and the text does not distinguish itself on any literary level.

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1. Darkó (ed.), *Laonici Chalkokondylae Demonstrationes Historiarum*, (Budapest 1927). Grecu, V. (ed), *Ducas. Istoria Turco-byzantina*, (Bucuresti 1966). Reinsch, H. (ed.), *Critobuli Imbriotae Historia*, (Berlin 1973).

2. Grecu, V. (ed.), *Georgios Sphrantzes Memorii, 1401-1477* (Bucuresti 1966), pp. 2, 32-35.

3. Frantzis' uncle (his father's brother) had been Constantine Palaiologos' teacher; see Grecu, V. (ed.), *Georgios Sphrantzes Memorii, 1401-1477* (Bucuresti 1966), p. 22.

4. Grecu, V. (ed.), *Georgios Sphrantzes Memorii, 1401-1477* (Bucuresti 1966), pp. 6-8.

5. Grecu, V. (ed.), *Georgios Sphrantzes Memorii, 1401-1477* (Bucuresti 1966), pp. 62, 66, 68, 72, 98, 104, 106.

6. Grecu, V. (ed.), *Georgios Sphrantzes Memorii, 1401-1477* (Bucuresti 1966), pp. 8, 18, 20-22, 50, 68-70, 92-94.

7. Grecu, V. (ed.), *Georgios Sphrantzes Memorii, 1401-1477* (Bucuresti 1966), pp. 74-82.

8. Grecu, V. (ed.), *Georgios Sphrantzes Memorii, 1401-1477* (Bucuresti 1966), p. 56.

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9. Grecu, V. (ed.), *Georgios Sphrantzes Memorii, 1401-1477* (Bucuresti 1966), pp. 56-60.

10. Hunger, H., *Βυζαντινή Λογοτεχνία* 2: *Η λόγια κοσμική γραμματεία των Βυζαντινών* (Αθήνα 1992), p. 353; Καραγιαννόπουλος, Ι.Ε., *Πηγαί της Βυζαντινής Ιστορίας* (Θεσσαλονίκη 1987), pp. 434-35.

11. Grecu, V. (ed.), *Georgios Sphrantzes Memorii, 1401-1477* (Bucuresti 1966), pp. 98-104.

12. Grecu, V. (ed.), *Georgios Sphrantzes Memorii, 1401-1477* (Bucuresti 1966), p. 96.

13. Grecu, V. (ed.), *Georgios Sphrantzes Memorii, 1401-1477* (Bucuresti 1966), p. 2.

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