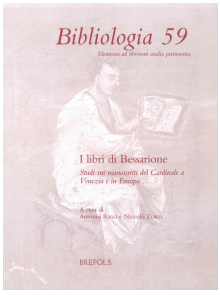
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Antonio Rigo, Niccolò Zorzi (eds.)

Bessarion's Books. I libri di Bessarione

Review by: Raf Van Rooy



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In 1468, Cardinal Bessarion (?1408-1472) donated his extensive collection of Greek manuscripts to the Republic of Venice. As «a strategist of memory» (p. 8), Bessarion wanted to build as complete as possible a library of Ancient Greek literature. After his death, occurred in in 1472, a large part of his remaining book collection was sent to Venice[1]. Today, several hundreds of Latin and even more Greek manuscripts from Bessarion's collection are still housed at the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in Venice, including older manuscripts acquired by Bessarion, manuscripts commissioned by the Cardinal, and manuscripts (partly) copied or annotated in his own hand, comprising also some of his youthly study books. In 2018, marking the 550th anniversary of Bessarion's donation, scholars devoted renewed attention to Bessarion's books, after earlier celebrations. One of the events organized zoomed in especially on those items that are not – or no longer – housed at the Marciana. This is also one of the main contributions of the volume reviewed here, as it reveals a number of *codices* that once belonged to Bessarion but are no longer in Venice (but e.g. in Milan, pp. 58-61, or in Paris, p. 225). The book moreover nuances earlier attributions (e.g. in Grottaferrata; pp. 367-404), dates certain manuscripts more accurately (e.g. pp. 405-414), and discovers annotations by Bessarion in various *codices* (e.g. p. 243). The overwhelming amount of new information brings tremendous progress to our knowledge of the extent and content of Bessarion's library, and of the ways in which the Cardinal used his books. Giacomelli, for instance, shows how Bessarion studied by reading and excerpting texts (p. 249), a lifelong endeavor for the Greek scholar from Trebizond, which started with different masters in his hometown, Constantinople, and Mystras.

I libri di Bessarione is one of the most coherent and best-documented studies in book history I have ever read. Extensive footnotes with

references to secondary literature and historical and codicological details grace a considerable portion of the book's pages, thus realizing its objective of building on secondary literature while substantially adding to it. The countless cross-references in the footnotes make the volume a fruit of scholarly collaboration *par excellence*, showing how scientific work should ideally be conducted: by coupling *akríbeia* with *liberalitas*. The scholarly method adopted in most contributions is nicely summarized by Cronier as identifying and analyzing Bessarion's manuscripts «through different approaches: paleography, philology, analysis of inventories, etc.» (p. 86), where the «etc.» first and foremost comprises codicology. As the book's title suggests, most contributions are in Italian, today the dominant language of Bessarion's scholarship.

After a preface by Marciana director Stefano Campagnolo (pp. 7-8), the editors offer a succinct historical sketch and *status quaestionis* (pp. 9-10), aptly followed by a bibliographical note (pp. 10-11) and an overview of the used bibliographical abbreviations (pp. 13-15). The first full-length contribution by David Speranzi (pp. 17-32) treats the different handwritings of Bessarion in order to unmask mistaken attributions and get a firmer grasp of how his handwriting changed over time and in different contexts, and to what extent it depended on his masters. Then, Stefano Martinelli Tempesta offers a new book-historical analysis of two Bessarionic manuscripts in Milan, and identifies two others, one of which with Ciro Giacomelli's help (pp. 33-61). In the only German contribution in the volume, Christian Gastgeber reveals how some of Bessarion's Greek manuscripts ended up in the Austrian National Library (pp. 63-83), not, as one would expect, because of Bessarion's visit to Vienna and his contacts with Johannes Regiomontanus, but through the mediation of Johannes Sambucus (1531-1584). Gastgeber also reveals a mistaken attribution to Bessarion. Subsequently, in her French chapter, Marie Cronier surveys the Greek and Latin manuscripts at the National Library of France (Paris) that Bessarion once owned or had some link to, as well as some books appearing in lists of Bessarion's library that are now lost (pp. 85-106). In a contribution full of stimulating hypotheses, Cronier argues that certain books must have left the Marciana illegally (p. 93) and counters the persistent misconception that Bessarion's books were generally hard to borrow (p. 99).

Fabio Acerbi's lengthy chapter on Bessarion's mathematical and astronomical books focuses on the documents used by him as an adolescent when he studied in Constantinople in the 1420s under Johannes Chortasmenos (pp. 107-218). Acerbi presents a rich study with substantial appendices that include editions of Bessarion's youthly but «high-level» compositions from his time as a student (p. 163), some of which he identifies as such for the first time (see p. 144). Then, the likewise lengthy contribution by Ciro Giacomelli (pp. 219-275) discusses works by Aristotle and his commentators in Bessarion's library, with a useful chronological survey from the oldest to the most recent Aristotelian manuscripts, showing Bessarion's text-critical efforts of purging and structuring. Giacomelli also offers a selective exploration of the prehistory of Bessarion's Aristotelian library, including manuscripts that once belonged to the Flemish Dominican William of Moerbeke (p. 259).

The final 150 pages again offer a series of shorter contributions. Niccolò Zorzi (pp. 277-305) and Ottavia Mazzon (pp. 307-326) provide a historiographic diptych. Zorzi offers a general analysis of Bessarion's historiographic manuscripts, spanning the entire history of Greece but focusing on antiquity. The contribution also insists on what Bessarion did not have, especially for the later Byzantine period, and on which authors he did not commission or collected in individual manuscripts (see esp. pp. 287ff.). Mazzon, in turn, presents a case study of how Bessarion read Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, compiling an anthology of «useful and unusual» passages and summaries of anecdotes. The manuscript with the anthology allows a unique opportunity «to access – in some way – the Cardinal's studies, so as to probe his interests and investigate his method of work» (p. 313), inspired by his master Pletho's method of excerpting Bessarion's main goal was linguistic refinement.

The next diptych concerns two religious-liturgical books, a category underrepresented in Bessarion's collection: one that Bessarion compiled himself, probably in his late teens, another that has been attributed to Bessarion, probably mistakenly, perhaps «so as to enhance the prestige of the manuscript» (p. 392). Luigi D'Amelia insists on young Bessarion's *Horologion*, a book of hours also containing religious hymns in service of liturgy (pp. 327-363). D'Amelia contends that Bessarion's manuscript represents another *recensio* of Gregory the Monk's *Synaxarion*, together with a manuscript now in Berlin, of which he offers a collation. At the same time, he puts forward a rather daring hypothesis on Bessarion's omission of a hymn on Saint Eugenius and his companions, which might also simply be due to the *Vorlage* he copied from. On the other hand, in a very well-structured paper, Donatella Bucca elaborates on an *Euchologium* preserved at Grottaferrata Monastery and attributed to Bessarion (pp. 367-404), which she, however, confirms to be of later date than usually thought (ca. 1300). Bucca is moreover skeptical about the manuscript's relationship to Bessarion and the Council of Ferrara-Florence, while casting light on the production of the manuscript, tying it to Antonios Malakes (archbishop of Veroia from ca. 1285).

Finally, in his brief English chapter, Eleftherios Despotakis treats a manuscript now in Oxford that Johannes Plousiadenos copied for Bessarion in 1463 (pp. 405-414), in which he determines more accurately the manuscript's date of creation and its vicissitudes from Venice to Crete to Venice and back again to Crete. Despotakis' hypothesis that «Bessarion had given it as a present to Plousiadenos for his Uniate preaching duties in Crete» (p. 411) seems, however, a bit far-fetched, if one takes into account that Plousiadenos had copied the manuscript himself. Despotakis compensated for his short chapter by providing two useful indices, one of manuscripts cited (pp. 415-423), the other of names mentioned (pp. 424-432).

In sum, the editors and authors have accomplished an impressive feat, delivering a book full of convincing and detailed analyses, even though I was not persuaded by every singly hypothesis, as indicated throughout my survey above. The book is certainly not an easy reading, especially if codicology and paleography are not one's principal specialization. The level of painstaking detail, championed in

Acerbi's long chapter, can be tantalizing. Still, this far-going scrutiny is needed, as it lays bare connections between manuscripts that have never before been linked (e.g. BnF gr. 1928, identified as a copy of BnF gr. 2344; see p. 134), even if this type of codicological research can remain highly hermetic to outsiders, up to the point of unreadability. Other advantages of analyzing manuscripts under a magnifying glass include the reconstruction of learned practices of Bessarion as well as of the scholars and students in his network, how they learned and advanced learning by transcribing manuscripts (e.g. pp. 144ff., pp. 162-164). The volume's occasional hermeticism could have been partly remedied by means of a synthesis at the back, surveying the exact progresses beyond the state of the art on Bessarion's library and its donation. Such a synthesis would have benefitted the formulation of follow-up research questions, which are now, if at all formulated, scattered throughout the volume.

The book is very elegantly type-set on high-gloss paper in a truly marvelous font, especially for Greek. Margins are broad, providing ample space for Renaissance-style marginal annotations. I found only a few typos, but none that hamper understanding (e.g. p. 254: καδρην λεως pro καρδην λεως). Other formal imperfections are limited, except for one major lay-out mistake on p. 58, where a line of main text has been mistakenly put beneath the footnotes, and some minor ones in Mazzon's contribution, where several cross-references went wrong (e.g. p. 323, n. 33). Language in the book is exceptionally solid, as most authors are native speakers of the languages they wrote in; only the English of the last chapter was not entirely impeccable, but not to the point of irritation. The book moreover includes many apt grayscale illustrations, although color images – only provided in the *tavole* of Bucca's contribution (pp. 401-404) – would have been better to verify paleographic details, but the choice for grayscale is of course understandable in terms of budget. These minor formal issues do not detract from the feat that is *I libri di Bessarione*, a highly coherent volume with balanced contributions of which both editors and authors may be proud. They have gone to great lengths to reveal that even highly valued and closely monitored collections such as Bessarion's one can suffer major losses, illustrating once again the surprising fates manuscripts can meet: *habent sua fata libelli*…

[1] All the English translations from the reviewed book are mine.