

N.G. Wilson. *From Byzantium to Italy: Greek Studies in the Italian Renaissance*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. Pp. x, 231. \$35.95.

First published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1992, *From Byzantium to Italy* is a curious choice for a second edition. Its author, Nigel Guy Wilson, a Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford, has produced an impressive array of important translations and scholarly contributions on Aristophanes, Herodotus, and Sophocles as well as works for the Oxford Classical Texts series and a study of Aldus Manutius and the Aldine Press for I Tatti Renaissance Library. Yet this second edition is a missed opportunity to make his tentative (the author's own words) sketch into something more substantive.

The book contains no Preface to the Second Edition except for two sentences added to the original. In them, Wilson claims the *revision* (emphasis mine) takes account of discoveries relating to the major figures" (x) in the twenty-five years since the original work appeared. However, little has been updated. Although there are thirty-one more pages than in the original, this is mostly the result of typeface and spacing. More important is the author's failure to address significant issues raised about the first edition contained in reviews, particularly those by George McClure (*American Historical Review*, June 1994) and John Rexine (*Renaissance Quarterly*, June 1994) regarding the coverage and lack of context. As McClure states, "with its short, choppy chapters – usually either biographical sketches of individual humanists or bibliographical catalogues of Greek texts and Latin translations in various collections – the book resembles a reference work more than a monograph."

I share such concerns. A more accurate title for this book would be *Greek Translators in the Italian Renaissance*, for the book is assuredly *not* about history or even classical studies. As in the original version, Wilson describes his book as a sketch and a provisional outline, the justification for which he claims is that a fuller account, both chronologically and historically, would have postponed publication for many years. A quarter of a century has passed since then, yet the book still reads as McClure described it.

The lack of an introduction is a major shortcoming. The book starts *in medias res*, without any context for or thesis about the burgeoning interest in Greek studies in the Italian peninsula. A proper start to the book would have begun with a discussion of the transmission of ancient Greek studies through first the Jewish and Christian worlds and then to Byzantium. Wilson appears to have made the assumption, probably accurately, that most readers will have already read his earlier book, *Scholars of Byzantium*, the first five chapters of which cover Greek studies in the Byzantine Empire. The remainder of that book takes us to the beginning of this one, but with major lacunae.

The work done by Muslim scholars in the the House of Wisdom in Baghdad and the caliphate of Cordobà, especially in the period from 750–1000, deserves attention. While the Aristotelian corpus was the focus of the greatest part of their translations and commentaries, the circle that formed around the great scholar Al-Kindi (801–873) in Baghdad synthesized and expanded the study of Greek science and edited earlier translations of Plato’s *Timaeus* and parts of the *Symposium*, *Republic*, and *Phaedo*. Al-Farabi (c. 872–950) preserved many original Greek texts and provided socio-religious commentaries that would exert influence on the Jewish philosopher Maimonides and later Christian scholars. While I would not expect an extensive discussion of the role of the Muslim world in the preservation, translation and synthesis of Greek works, no proper study can ignore the contributions.

As the works were translated into Latin, they slowly spread to northern Europe, becoming an important factor in the development of medieval universities and what is often referred to as the “long” twelfth-century Renaissance. This too is overlooked in the book. In his *Scribes and Scholars*, co-authored with L.D. Reynolds, Wilson describes that century as “not a particularly enticing one for the classical scholar (116).” While the outlook of Italian Renaissance thinkers was inherently different from that of scholars in the Middle Ages, the earlier influences and commentaries should not be ignored. Although most commentaries were based on Latin translations, Gerald of Cremona (1114–1187), who learned Arabic in Toledo, translated over eighty mostly mathematical and scientific works into Latin. In the thirteenth century, William of Moerbeke (1215–1286), archbishop of Corinth, made translations of Aristotle’s *Politics* and works by Proclus and Archimedes. The Hippocratic Corpus and Galen became widely accessible in this period, largely through Arab translations into Latin. By contrast, Greek specialists in the Renaissance largely neglected medical and scientific sources. To dismiss the earlier period so casually accepts the Petrarchan view of an age of darkness between classical antiquity and the Renaissance.

Instead of an introduction, Wilson starts with the teaser “which famous poet treasured his copy of Homer but could never learn Greek” (2)? The answer is Petrarch, who cherished his copy of the *Iliad*, but was unable to read it. His contemporary Boccaccio advanced beyond the beginning stages of ancient Greek thanks to his own passion and the teaching in Florence of Leonzio Pilato from 1360–1362. Yet Wilson dismisses Pilato’s significance because his translations were “too literal and mediocre” to have made a larger impact.

At the end of the first chapter, the author laments the “failure to produce a continuing tradition of teaching and scholarship...in that they are no more than repetitions of what had occurred from time to time during the middle ages” (7). He adds, however, that in 1397 that the situation was about to change. The arrival of the diplomat Manuel Chrysoloras and his introduction to Florence’s chancellor, Coluccio Salutati, marked the beginning of a new period of Greek studies in the Renaissance. The teaching of

Chrysoloras had the greatest impact on Leonardo Bruni, the father of civic humanism. The chapter focuses almost entirely on Bruni's translation skills and the degree of his knowledge but not how he applied it to the increasingly important role of the individual in civic life. Succeeding chapters summarize the studies, translations, and book collections of Vittorino da Feltre, Guarino, and Filelfo. In many cases, a significant amount of time is devoted to a teacher or translator, only to point out their failings at the end of a section. Slightly more context is given to the philologist Lorenzo Valla (1407–57), who benefitted from earlier translations and the creation of lexicons and grammar books. Significantly, he spent much of his time on the histories, especially of Thucydides, which had stymied earlier humanists, most of whom had focused on Plutarch.

The remainder of the book focuses on the second half of the Quattrocento, which benefitted not only from the Council of Florence but also the influx of Greek scholars after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. An important section is devoted to the work of Marsilio Ficino, who translated most of Plato's works under Medici sponsorship. But once again, Wilson does not explore the historical context or importance of the translations for Florentine society. In this and the following section, there is only a brief mention of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), yet with no analysis of how his Greek translations may have influenced his Renaissance manifesto, "The Oration on the Dignity of Man."

In the chapters that follow, Wilson discusses briefly the importance of Greek studies in Padua, Bologna, Ferrara, Messina and especially Venice. The latter provides him with what is obviously his greatest interest, the work of Aldus Manutius (1451–1515), whose printing press produced Greek texts of many of the works that had been translated during the Quattrocento. The author's passion appears stronger in this section of the book, no doubt because of his translation of *Aldus Manutius: The Greek Classics*. Wilson ends the book at 1515, noting that most Greek works had already been translated and were available to the public.

There are other problems in the book besides the brevity of many sections and lack of historical or social context. Wilson frequently words his comments in conditional, speculative or negative constructions. Ironically, translation is another problem. While the author almost always translates a Latin text into English, he does not do so with Greek. This is odd, since most Italian Renaissance scholars can read Latin but many fewer Greek. As an example, he says Bessarion "did not know about the Athenian review of youths being admitted to the privileges of citizenship and tried to put the text right by changing *δοκιμασθή* to *δοκιμαση*. He read the *Republic* with some care and made adjustments to his copy with varying success; there are half a dozen plausible suggestions and a fair number of others which seem less attractive" (73). Although Wilson provides two footnotes for this passage, they are only references. Nowhere does he explain either the importance of the mistaken translation or "the plausible suggestions."

This book, in its new paperback format, will undoubtedly be of use to scholars of translation and graduate students as a starting point for their work on particular translators or individual works. However, it will not satisfy scholars of the Italian Renaissance who want answers to questions about the influence of Greek works on the development of academic and civic humanism.

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