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Rémi Franckowiak

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Athanasius Rhetor's biography

Rémi Franckowiak (S2HEP / Université de Lille – Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1)

in Digital archive concerning alchemy in Byzantium and in Greek-speaking communities of the Ottoman Empire (DACALBO), 2015

<http://docalbo.hpdst.gr/archive/item/784?lang=en>

Athanasius Rhetor was born in Cyprus, in Costanza precisely, about the year of the Turkish invasion of the island in 1571. He lost his parents when he was rather young, but he managed to move to Constantinople where he was taken into care by the Patriarchate. Then he became hieromonk (i.e. a priestmonk) and Protosyggelos (i.e. vicar-general) of the Church of Constantinople. Although he was Orthodox, Athanasius was also educated in a Jesuit College, at the expense of the Patriarchs. It is certainly under such influences – but also in a particular climate of the Orthodox Patriarchate's pursuit of a Western support against the Turks – that Athanasius became an ardent defender of a catholic Orthodoxy; and his position gave rise to controversy in 1614 with Hilarion, Metropolitan of Heraclea. About that time, “for the love of knowledge”, Athanasius decided to go to Rome in the hope of joining the Pontifical Greek College ‘Saint Athanasius’ (he had converted to Catholicism meanwhile). Indeed he was rejected because of his age (he was around 50 years old); however, he stayed in Rome. Then he came to Paris probably in 1615 and in the 1620s he settled there where he got in touch with, inter alia, Pierre Séguier, Chancellor of France since 1635.

In Paris, Athanasius was taking part in the intellectual debates and polemics of his time. He must have belonged by this time to the entourage of Séguier to whom he dedicated several works. Thus in 1639 and 1641, he published three philosophical and theological books.¹ The first one (about the knowledge of God and the eternal truths) was only dedicated to the chancellor Séguier, the second one (on the vices and virtues of the human beings according to Iamblichus who was a rather rare Neoplatonic reference at that time) to Cardinal Richelieu and the third one (against those who were claiming that the rational soul was mortal and that this was Aristotle's position) to Séguier, as well as to the bishop of Saint-Malo, Achille de Harlay, who was ambassador of France to Constantinople during the period 1610-1619. In 1655, 1657 and 1662, Athanasius published five more volumes on the union of the Christian churches and against the 1637 Parisian edition of Campanella's *De sensu rerum et magia* (in February 1638 Athanasius had already received for this purpose the authorization of the Sorbonne's theological authorities to print this book); volumes were dedicated to Cardinal Spada,

¹ Here are Athanasius' books:

- 1639: P.[atris] A.[thanisii] O.[rat]oris *Opuscula philosophica quatuor: quorum inscriptiones in singulorum videbis principiis*, (Latin and ancient Greek), Paris, dedicated to Séguier.
- 1639: *Delitiae animae sive hortus ex iis quae Iamblichō magno elaborate sunt consitus*, (Latin and Greek), Paris, dedicated to Richelieu.
- 1641: P.[atris] Athanasii Rhetoris Byzantini. *Aristoteles propriam de Animae immortalitate mentem explicans. Opus vere singulare ... ex multi sac variis Philosophis collectum Aristotelis ipsius Auditoribus, qui sibi ex ordine successerunt, sententiae dogmatum ipsius initiati, praesertim vero admirabili & magno Iamblichoi*, (Latin and Greek), Paris, volume 1 dedicated to Séguier, volume 2 dedicated to Achille de Harlay.
- 1655 (1657 for the second edition) and 1662: D.[octoris] Athanasii Rhetoris Presbyteri Byzantini *Anticampanella in Compendium redactus adversus librum de sensu rerum & Magia*, (Latin only), Paris, dedicated to Cardinal Spada (and to Séguier) and Louis XIV.

Latin patriarch of Constantinople, to Séguier and to Louis XIV. The East was thus regularly represented through Athanasius' dedications.

At about the end of the year 1642, Séguier had the project to enrich his library with Greek manuscripts. For that purpose, he sent 71-year-old Athanasius to the East in order to buy and send to him rare and precious manuscripts. On 1 August 1643, Athanasius introduced himself to the ambassador of France in Constantinople, Jean de La Haye, before starting his mission in monasteries in Constantinople, Cyprus, Thrace, Macedonia and Thessaly.

Almost at the same time – in 1643 – Cardinal Mazarin thought of enhancing his own library with Greek and Eastern manuscripts, too. To this end, he wrote to the ambassador of France in Constantinople to request his assistance. About the middle of the following year, Jean de La Haye sent a capuchin, Father Romain, towards Mount Lebanon to explore the Arab libraries, and Athanasius towards Thessaloniki. Athanasius was thus in charge of an identical mission on behalf of two different and powerful figures.

His mission was long and rather perilous (Venetian blockade, pirates, corsairs, aggressiveness of the monks, health problems). Athanasius spent 10 years in the East and sent more than 300 Greek manuscripts to France. As far as Séguier was concerned, he paid 4,500 pounds for his acquisitions. Nevertheless, it has to be said that Athanasius did not devote all his time, during the 10 years he stayed in the East, to the achievement of his mission. He was living as a priest with the authorization of Patriarch Parthenion. Moreover, it is strongly probable that Athanasius also devoted his time to the learning chemistry, to the meeting of craftsmen and chemists, and to the writing of the recipes of the two France National Library's SG 1027 and SG 1030 manuscripts.

Upon his return to France, Athanasius was to be responsible in Séguier's library for the Greek manuscripts he had chosen and sent. But a disagreement very quickly appeared between him and his patron. By 1655, the chancellor Séguier acquired – through the seizure of a baillif who spent a whole day in Athanasius' home to this end – 116 Greek manuscripts which Athanasius had brought for his own account from the East. He never managed to get them back, nor to get money in compensation. On 13 March 1663, Athanasius – 92 years old – died in rue Saint-Jean-de-Beauvais, in a house depending on the abbey of Sainte-Genevieve, and was buried in the church of Saint-Etienne-au-Mont. A fortnight later, Séguier was officially granted Athanasius' 116 manuscripts (*par droit d'aubaine*); Athanasius' other possessions were given to a musketeer of the king and to his footmen. However, the books that Athanasius owned were preserved at the abbey of Sainte-Genevieve's library.

The France National Library's Department of the Western manuscripts had the following manuscripts of Athanasius Rhetor in its collection "Supplément Grec": SG 1014, SG 1026, SG 1027 and SG 1030.