

Meet Anna, Publisher in Venice 600 Years Ago

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The first female publisher in history was named Anna. We are not speaking of Anna Rugerin, the printer from Augsburg, nor of Anna Fabri, her colleague in Stockholm, but of Anna Notaras Paleologina. Few know of her, but by her own choice. The desire to conceal her name was a matter of *noblesse oblige* of a Byzantine exile – a name which embodied the highest nobility of the empire that had collapsed behind her.

The Notaras were the most aristocratic and powerful family of the kingdom of Paleologhi. The Grand Duke Loukas Notaras, Anna's father, was prime minister to the last Emperor, Constantine XI, whom they say Anna was destined to marry and thus become empress, had he survived the Turkish siege of 1453. This did not come to pass, nor did Anna's father survive: he died, they say, by suicide, after witnessing before his very eyes the massacre of his three sons and the deportation of his youngest to the harem of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror.

Yet before this occurred – before the city fell, and Byzantium was finished (if it ever truly was) – Kyr Loukas had sent away his most intelligent daughter, entrusting her not only with a portion of treasures from his palaces, but with the family's capital: foreign deposits, essentially Genoese and Venetian securities based on investments in Italian commercial enterprises of which her grandfather, Nicola, had already acquired shares and loans. So grand were his connections and his fortune that Anna's father held honorary citizenship not only of Genoa but of Venice too.

It was through the use of these offshore accounts that the young Byzantine, first under Bessarion's eagle's wing and later completely independently, financed cultural and religious ventures that would make Venice the preferred destination of Greek refugees and defectors, the so-called *graeculi*. There she settled after her passage to Italy and a few initial misadventures; there she channeled her interests and utilized not only her financial resources but also the political determination she had inherited from her father to unite the community of exiles and preserve their memory.

In 1479, it was estimated that the Greek residents in the Republic numbered between four and five thousand. Many of them were soldiers, the *stradioti* (from the Greek *stratiotes*, "soldier"), who had entered the service of the *Serenissima* to fight, in the name of their lost homeland, the Turkish enemy. Many of them would go on to attain high ranks in the service of the city which nevertheless bore glaring responsibility for the fall of Byzantium. This political trauma and a sort of collective sense of guilt had fueled, at least amongst its cultural elite, a yearning to keep alive the memory of Byzantine civilization and knowledge, annihilated by history; so alive that it became almost a kind of transference.

It was Bessarion, after all, who – fifteen years after the fall of Constantinople – described Venice as 'alterum Byzantium', 'the second Byzantium'. More and more children and grandchildren of those Greeks would go on to enlist in the military expeditions that the *Serenissima* waged against the Turks throughout the fifteenth century and the century following, until the Battle of Lepanto. All this contributed to Anna's strength.

She facilitated the founding of the Greek *ethnos* confraternity, for whose worship the Church of San Giorgio on the Rio dei Greci was built – thanks in part to his bequest – and which today still preserves amongst its treasures the three ancient, magnificent icons that she brought from Constantinople. She fought for the freedom of Orthodox worship and secured it, first in her own home, then in the church. Even today the San Giorgio dei Greci complex – comprising the cathedral church, the adjoining museum, and the Institute of Hellenic Studies, as well as serving as the seat of the Orthodox Archdiocese of Italy – remains a global center for philhellenism. Most of all, Anna fought to spread Byzantine culture through books. She inherited this challenge from the recently deceased “Eastern” Cardinal Bessarione, who dedicated his life to collecting Greek manuscripts. In doing so, she also honored her father’s memory, reviving the knowledge of the empire he had served; she ensured Byzantine books would not merely survive but be reborn and multiply through the tool her mentor recognized for its immense communicative potential: the printing press. Anna not only maintained and enriched in her residence a vast library, but also became a publisher, the first and greatest of the “Western” Annas who until today are considered the first female printers (who were in fact merely typesetters, like the various widows of printers who would, for varying lengths of time, carry on the businesses of their deceased husbands). Anna Notaras’ role was if anything more akin to that of Charlotte Guillard, the sixteenth-century publisher of the *Soleil d’or* in Paris’ Latin Quarter. She financed and directed – with the ineffable discretion of anonymity which only the study of her will has revealed – the pioneering printing house of Kalliergis, a Cretan who had established in Venice a press dedicated exclusively to the printing of Greek works, at a time before Aldus Manutius’s reign had yet begun.

Unlike the German Anna and the Swedish Anna, the Byzantine Anna used a proxy, her manager Nicola Vlastos, and did not sign the colophons of books whose publication she decided on, financed, and oversaw. Only once in the final colophon of the famous *Etymologicum Magnum*, published by Kalliergis’ printing house, is there mention of the “most illustrious and modest Lady Anna, daughter of Loukas Notaras, former Grand Duke of Constantinople,” and this is because, as paleographers have shown, some of the stunning decorations on the title pages and initial letters were modelled on elaborate embroidery specially created by Anna and her granddaughter and collaborator, Eudocia.

Anna’s “modesty”, underlined in this description, consisted first and foremost in ensuring that her role remained undisclosed. Yet it was she herself who secured the authorization to print and the imprimatur of the Venetian Senate – an institution with which she always dealt as an equal, armed with the courtly titles she had inherited alongside her financial holdings (Hermeneutinam, echoing the Byzantine court title of [Di]ermenueutes or Interpreter, Megadokisa, the feminine form of Grand Duke).

An entry in Marin Sanudo’s diary dated 8th July, 1508 reads: “Today a Greek lady who had lived in this city died in San Zulian. She was the daughter of a man of high rank in Constantinople during the reign of the Emperor Palaiologos. She was over a hundred years old and died a



Patriarch Sergius I is depicted at the center of the battlements, leading the defense of Constantinople.

virgin. She was wealthy.” It is probably not true that Anna passed the age of a hundred (nor perhaps that she was a virgin). But it is highly likely that her image as a hieratic old woman – whom we cannot help but imagine dressed in the traditional, austere attire of Byzantine ladies – must have been etched like an icon in the memory of the Venetian nobles and citizens, unchanged for many years. This solitary woman, immensely wealthy and highly authoritative, possessing extraordinary influence over the Venetian government, must have embodied in the Venice of that time the very symbol of Byzantium’s *auctoritas* and its civilization.

In this sense we can argue not only, as Sanudo did, that she was over a hundred years old, but that she was well over a thousand. This unyielding ambassador of defeated Hellenism was the female phantasm of ancient Constantinople, destroyed by the Turks, though not without the shared blame of the Venetians.

This publisher and lace-maker was indeed perhaps the Shakespearean revenant of their guilt. For this reason, perhaps, she was feared, respected, and protected by them in a way Constantinople had failed to.

Image: Lazzaro Donati, *La signora dal Ventaglio*, 1959. Schwarz editore