Chapter VI

Leo the Philosopher (or Mathematician) and his Times

Here is our first example in Byzantium of a truly "Renaissance man", a man whom we can picture in some detail. He was, we know, related to

1. Several notes have been devoted to Leo, mostly short and more or less dependent on each other: J.B. BURY, A History of the Eastern Roman Empire 802-867, London, 1912, pp. 436-442; L. BRÉHIER, La civilisation byzantine, Paris, 1950, pp. 465-467; E. LIPŠIC, Vizantijskij učenyj Lev Matematik [The Byzantine scholar Leo the Mathematician], Viz. Vrem., 2, 1949, pp. 106-149 = E. LIPŠIC, Odkri istorii vizantijskogo obščestva i kul'tury VIII-pervaja polovina IX veka [Research on the History and Society of the Byzantine Civilisation in the 8th and first half of the 9th centuries], Moscow-Leningrad, 1961, pp. 338-366 (the most far-reaching study; cited hereafter from Viz. Vrem.); J. IRIGOIN, Survie et renouveau de la littérature antique à Constantinople (IXe siècle), Cahiers de Civilisation médiévale, 5, 1962, cf. pp. 291-293; V. LAURENT, Une homélie inédite de l'archevêque de Thessalonique Léon le Philosophe sur l'Annonciation (25 mars 842), Mélanges Eugène Tisserant II (Studi e Testi, 232), Vatican, 1964, pp. 281-302, cf. pp. 282-286. - There is no need to go back over the distinction to be drawn between three men of the same name who have long been confused, Leo the Philosopher or Mathematician, Leo Choiropakhites, and Leo VI the Wise: the history of this problem has been traced in detail by E. LIPŠIC, op. cit., pp. 106-120. Cf. also G. KOLIAS, Léon Choiropakhité, magistre, proconsul et patrice, Textes und Forschungen sur byzantinisch-neugriechischem Philologus, 31, Athens, 1939, pp. 65 ff. And for the confusion with Leo VI: C. MANGO, The Legend of Leo the Wise, Zbornik Radova LKV, Visantološki Institut 8, Belgrade, 1960, pp. 59-93. - Finally I am sorry to have to say that there is nothing to be gained from the long article by J.E. ANASTASIOU, 'H κατάστασις τῆς παιδείας εἰς τὸ Βυζάντιον κατὰ τὴν διάρκειαν τοῦ ἕτερου αἰώνος: Κυρίλλω καὶ Μεθοδίῳ τόμος έδρτιος, I, Thessalonica, 1966, pp. 31-77. [P. SPECK has now published a work under the title Die kaiserliche Universität von Konstantinopel (Munich, Byzantinisches Archiv 14, 1974), which goes over exactly the same territory as several parts of my work, and to which I refer once and for all, since it is not possible to do so every time that we agree or disagree (with some notable exceptions). In this work, his first chapter, "Leon der Philosoph und die Gründung des Bardas" (pp. 1-13), corresponds in part to my chapter here. There is nothing that is essential to remark on it.]
John the Grammarian, though some twenty or thirty years his junior. However, we hasten to add that, in spite of superficial similarities, he had little in common with John, and his contemporaries and posterity could see this.

He was born probably in Constantinople, where he Leo, self-taught, obtained his initial education. But even if he completed his education in grammar and poetry, he could not go further, for lack of teachers. At least that is what is to be inferred from Theophanes Continuatus IV, 29, reporting an admission Leo made to one of his close friends: it was on Andros, in the company of a learned man, that he taught himself rhetoric, philosophy and arithmetic. Why on Andros? What reason brought Leo while still quite young to this island? Who was this learned man? We are not told, and we know nothing about it. It is true that where Theophanes Continuatus is silent another chronicle, which follows it here almost word for word, the synopsis of Kedrenos-Skylitzes, gives a name, that of Michael Psellos. This must be either an interpolation by an ignorant copyist, or pure invention on the part of an author who, without committing so gross an anachronism, thought he could compliment Psellos by giving him an ancestor and namesake as learned as himself. Whatever the explanation we should not give this comment any sort of credence. Moreover, on the evidence of Leo him-

2. His cousin, according to the author of Book IV of Theophanes Continuatus, Bonn, p. 185: κατὰ συγγένειαν τοῦ ἐξαδέλφου τῆς πατριάρχης Ἰαννῆς ὑφείποτο: his nephew, Kedrenos wrongly claims, Bonn, II, p. 166: ἄνεργος ἄν Ἰαννῆς τοῦ πατριάρχου. 

3. At least nothing causes us to question this. There is a tendency in all quarters to repeat that he was born in Thessaly, at Hypata, on the basis of an epigram published by BOISSONADE (Anecdota Graeca, II, p. 470), who has attributed it to Leo. But it has already been shown that if it indeed refers to a Leo, this can only be Choirospahaktes: cf. KOLIAS, op. cit. (above, note 1), p. 16, note 3.

4. Bonn, p. 192; Cf. KEDRENOS, Bonn, II, p. 170, reporting the same tradition.


6. Unfortunately scholars have long believed in the existence of this Michael Psellos the Elder, and they have also believed that this Leo, his student, was the emperor Leo IV (775-780): cf. for example A. ORLANDOS, Βυζαντινὴ μνημεία τῆς Ἀνδροῦ, in Ἀρχείον τῶν Βυζαντινῶν μνημείων τῆς Ἑλλάδος, 8, 1955-1956, pp. 1-67, cf. p. 3 (following in part the unfounded statements of D.P. PASCHALES, Ἡ Ἀνδροῦ, I, Athens, 1925, passim). Most recently see D.I. POLEMIS, in Byzantinostavioa, 26, 1965, pp. 80-81, whose explanation (introduction into the text of a marginal gloss giving a date for the reign of Michael II the Stammerer, whose nickname can be represented by ψελλος) seems very unlikely to me.