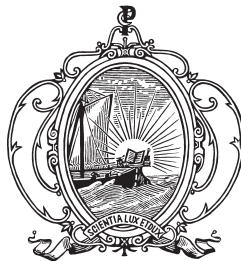


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**Greeks, Latins, and
Intellectual History
1204-1500**

Edited by

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Chris Schabel



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GREEKS AT THE PAPAL CURIA IN THE FIFTEENTH
CENTURY: THE CASE OF GEORGE VRANAS,
BISHOP OF DROMORE AND ELPHIN

Jonathan HARRIS

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, some Byzantine intellectuals took an extraordinarily positive view of Rome and the papacy. Demetrius Kydones, a Catholic convert, hailed those who acknowledged the authority of the pope as virtuous, prosperous, law-abiding and courageous Christians, and his pupil and fellow-convert, Manuel Chrysoloras, expressed his amazement at the devotion felt by Catholic Christians for the pope so that men and women from as far away as England would make arduous pilgrimage to the Holy See. For Kydones, the Church of Rome was “a storehouse of all wisdom, bringing forth companies of philosophers, surrounded by groups of theologians, adorned by monks of manifold virtue”.¹

Unfortunately, the late medieval papal curia was not a collection of other worldly individuals given to contemplating higher things. It was more like a secular court and the centre of a vast bureaucracy. Many of its members were laymen and even the clergy were largely occupied with matters of state and administration. By the late fifteenth century cardinals were usually the sons of princes or the relatives of the pope and they lived in a style worthy of a monarch. As a centre of government and power, Rome was a place to get rich and the halls of the curia were thronged with diplomats, bankers, artists and soldiers who were all drawn there for political and financial reasons. Inevitably, with so much at stake, the curia was also a centre of political intrigue. The papacy changed hands quickly, for its incumbents were always elderly

1. DEMETRIUS KYDONES, *Apologia della propria fede*, in: *Notizie di Proculo e Demetrio Cidone, Manuele Caleca e Teodoro Meliteniota*, ed. G. MERCATI (Studi e Testi 56), Vatican City 1931, pp. 359-435, esp. 373; F. KIANKA, “The Apology of Demetrius Cydones: a fourteenth-century autobiographical source”, in: *Byzantine Studies* 7 (1980), pp. 57-71, esp. 67; MANUEL CHRYSOLORAS, *Epistola ad Joannem Imperatorem*, in: J.-P. MIGNÉ (ed.), *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 156, cols. 23-54, esp. 32.

men who everyone knew would die within ten years or so. When a new pope was elected, he brought with him a crowd of his own favourites and those left over from the previous pontificate might find themselves marginalised. There was constant manoeuvring as each party sought to ensure that the next pope was favourable to their interests.² Consequently those with rather more first-hand knowledge of the curia tended to be less complimentary than the optimistic Byzantines. Humanists of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century presented Rome not as a centre of religious life but of worldliness and depravity. Erasmus famously portrayed Pope Julius II (1503-1513) being turned away from the gates of Paradise by St Peter.³

Nevertheless, as the Byzantine world finally succumbed to Turkish domination, Rome remained an irresistible magnet for Greek intellectuals and converts who hoped to secure patronage and security. Foremost among them was Thomas Palaiologos, younger brother of the last emperor, Constantine XI. In 1461 he fled the Turkish conquest of the Morea and arrived in Rome as a humble supplicant to live out the rest of his days there on a papal pension. A number of distinguished scholars were also lured to Rome in the hope of advancement, such as Andronicus Kallistos, Theodore Gaza, John Argyropoulos, George of Trebizond and Demetrius Rhaoul Kavakes.⁴ Among these Byzantines in Rome, Cardinal Bessarion seems to be the obvious success story. Bessarion had led the pro-union party among the Byzantine delegation at the Council of Florence and was well rewarded when he moved to Rome in around 1440. As well as the cardinal priesthood of the Church of the Holy Apostles, Bessarion held, at one point or another, the bishoprics of Sabina, Tusculum, Thebes,

2. E. LEE, *Sixtus IV and Men of Letters* (Temi e Testi 26), Rome 1978, pp. 33-45; M. MALLETT, *The Borgias: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Dynasty*, London 1969, pp. 42-46; M. PELLEGRINI, "A turning point in the history of the factional system in the sacred college: the power of the pope and the cardinals in the age of Alexander VI", in: G. SIGNORETTO and M.A. VISCEGLIA (eds.), *Court and Politics in Papal Rome, 1492-1700*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 8-30.

3. DESIDERIUS ERASMUS, *Julius excluded*, trans. M.J. HEATH, in: A.H.T. LEVI (ed.), in: *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 27, Toronto, Buffalo and London 1986, pp. 155-197, esp. 196; C.L. STINGER, "Roman humanist images of Rome", in: S. GENSINI (ed.), *Roma Capitale (1447-1527)*, Pisa 1994, pp. 15-38, esp. 23-24.

4. J. HARRIS, *Greek Émigrés in the West, 1400-1520*, Camberley 1995, pp. 29-31; W. MILLER, "Balkan exiles in Rome", in: IDEM, *Essays in the Latin Orient*, Cambridge 1921, pp. 497-515.

Manfredonia, Mazzero and Pamplona. In 1463 he became archbishop of Negroponte and titular Latin patriarch of Constantinople. All these appointments brought with them considerable revenues making Bessarion a veritable prince of the Church.⁵

For many years, Bessarion's wealth and status meant that Byzantine exiles in Rome had a powerful patron. His house at the foot of the Quirinal near the Church of the Holy Apostles acted as their meeting point and Bessarion expended a great deal of money paying ransoms and providing pensions. Among the Byzantine exiles who benefited from his patronage at one time or another were the scholars Andronicus Kallistos, Theodore Gaza and George Hermonymos, the future bishops Athanasius Chalkeopoulos and Alexios Kelodanos, and two passing Constantinopolitan refugees, Thomas Eparchos and George Diplovatatzes.⁶ Bessarion also looked after the interests of Andreas, Manuel and Zoe, the children of Thomas Palaiologos, who arrived in Rome shortly after their father's death in May 1465. It was Bessarion who arranged for their education and took the lead in the negotiations which led to the marriage of Zoe to the Grand Duke of Moscow in the summer of 1472.⁷ Bessarion was not the only former Byzantine ecclesiastic in Rome to play this role. Both Cardinal Isidore, former archbishop of Kiev, and the patriarch of Constantinople, Gregory III, who had fled to Rome in 1450 to escape anti-unionist agitation in Constantinople, were entrusted with money by the pope to distribute

5. C. EUBEL, *Hierarchia Catholica Medii Aevi*, vol. 2, Münster 1914, pp. 8, 135, 188, 211, 238, 249.

6. G. CAMMELLI, "Andronico Callisto", in: *La Rinascità* 5 (1942), pp. 104-21, 174-214, esp. 174-176; D.J. GEANAKOPLOS, "Theodore Gaza, a Byzantine scholar of the Palaeologan "renaissance" in the early Italian Renaissance (c.1400-1475)", in: IDEM, *Constantinople and the West: Essays on the Late Byzantine (Palaeologan) and Italian Renaissance and the Byzantine and Roman Churches*, Madison WI 1989, pp. 68-90, esp. 77-81; M. KALATZI, "Are the two Greek scribes, George Hermonymos and Charitonymos Hermonymos, one and the same person?", in: *Thesaurismata* 26 (1996), pp. 105-118, esp. 117-118; G. PIGNATARO, "Un vescovo di Gerace alla corte di Cipro (1467-1468) e un matrimonio mancato", in: *Historica* 17 (1964), pp. 19-23; N.H. MINNICH, "Alexios Celodanus: a disciple of Bessarion in Renaissance Italy", in: *Historical Reflections/Reflections Historiques* 15 (1988), pp. 47-64; J. HARRIS, "Publicising the Crusade: English bishops and the Jubilee Indulgence of 1455", in: *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 50 (1999), pp. 23-37, esp. 33; L. MOHLER, *Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Staatsmann und Humanist*, vol. 1, Paderborn 1923, pp. 249, 331-335; HARRIS, *Greek Émigrés*, pp. 102-103.

7. J. HARRIS, "A worthless prince? Andreas Palaeologus in Rome, 1465-1502", in: *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 61 (1995), pp. 537-554, esp. 538.

among refugees.⁸ The sheer weight of resources available to Bessarion, however, ensured that he was the pre-eminent patron of Byzantines in Rome.

Yet if the Greek exiles believed that Rome and Bessarion's household offered some kind of secure and trouble-free paradise, they were mistaken. On 18 November 1472, Bessarion died at Ravenna while on the return journey from a legatine mission to France. Rumours quickly circulated that the elderly cardinal was the victim of intrigue at the curia. It was said that his former protégé, Francesco della Rovere, who had recently been elected as Pope Sixtus IV (1471-84), found it embarrassing to have the high-principled Bessarion around the curia disapproving of his every action. So he decided to get rid of his former patron by sending him as legate to France. It was effectively a death sentence since Bessarion's frail health was completely undermined by the difficult journey.⁹

Whether the rumour was true or not, and it may well not have been, the effect on Bessarion's Greek protégés was soon apparent. Sixtus IV was by no means the worst of the fifteenth-century popes, but he was a big spender. He embarked on several major building projects, including the renovation of several of the great basilicas, and at the same time he involved the papacy in another round of Italian wars. He was also a notorious nepotist who took every opportunity to provide for members of his extended family.¹⁰ The effect soon made itself felt on the pension given to Andreas and Manuel Palaiologos from the Apostolic Camera. It began to be paid irregularly and was progressively cut down. As matters got worse, Manuel left Rome and ultimately went to Constantinople where the Ottoman sultan proved to be more generous. Andreas' pension was then halved to take account of Manuel's departure and in November 1478 it plummeted again from 150 ducats a month to 104. The reason for the

8. HARRIS, *Greek Émigrés*, p. 101.

9. VESPASIANO DA BISTICCI, *Le Vite*, ed. A. GRECO, vol. 1, Florence 1970, pp. 169-175, esp. 174; LEE, *Sixtus IV*, pp. 17-18, 29-31; J.W. O'MALLEY, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c.1450-1521*, Durham NC 1979, p. 211; P. OURLIAC, "Louis XI et le Cardinal Bessarion", in: *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique du Midi de la France* 5 (1942-45), pp. 33-55, and reprinted in: IDEM, *Études d'histoire du droit médiéval*, Paris 1979, pp. 491-505; LEE, *Sixtus IV*, p. 31.

10. LEE, *Sixtus IV*, pp. 33-45, 123-150.

reduction, it was stated in the accounts, was the wars that were then in progress. This was a reference to Sixtus' struggle against Florence in alliance with Naples that had followed the failure of the Pazzi conspiracy to assassinate Lorenzo de' Medici in April 1478. As a result of the curtailment of his pension, Andreas spent the rest of his life in virtual poverty, travelling around the courts of Western Europe seeking gifts to supplement his pension and ultimately selling his title to the throne of Constantinople to the king of France.¹¹

Many other former protégés of the Greek cardinal seem to have left Rome in the years that followed. Theodore Gaza departed for Southern Italy in 1473, allegedly incensed by Sixtus' failure to pay him properly for his translation of Aristotle's *De Animalibus*, and went to live in Calabria where he died in around 1475.¹² Andronicus Kallistos had left Rome in 1471, while Bessarion was still alive, seemingly to take up a teaching position in Florence. The move was not a success, and in 1475 Kallistos travelled to Milan and then to London, where he is said to have died in poverty in 1476.¹³ George Hermonymos left Rome in 1473 when he was sent by Sixtus to London to negotiate the release of the archbishop of York, who had been imprisoned by the king of England. He never returned to Rome and ended up in Paris where he taught Greek to a number of rather ungrateful students.¹⁴

While Gaza, Kallistos and Hermonymos had not prospered in Rome without Bessarion's protection, not all of the Greek cardinal's Greek protégés fared so badly. The key to success was obtaining ecclesiastical office. This was the case with Athanasius Chalkeopoulos, who became bishop of Gerace in Calabria in 1461, no doubt with Bessarion's sponsorship, and remained so until his death in 1497.¹⁵ There is another example of a Greek who succeeded in making his fortune at the papal curia through ecclesiastical office, apparently surviving the coming and going of several popes and dying a wealthy man at an advanced age, without the help of a powerful Greek patron. He was not a cardinal or a member of the Byzantine royal family, but an

11. HARRIS, "Worthless prince", pp. 539-545.

12. LEE, *Sixtus IV*, pp. 171-174; GEANAKOPOLOS, "Theodore Gaza", pp. 87-88.

13. CAMMELLI, "Andronico Callisto", pp. 178-182, 202-213.

14. HARRIS, *Greek Emigrés*, pp. 143-147.

15. EUBEL, vol. 2, p. 159.

obscure individual called George Vranas, or Branas, as it is usually spelt in the western archival records.

Originally from Athens, Vranas is first known to have been in Rome in July 1477, some five years after the death of Bessarion, when Sixtus IV was still pope. He came as a refugee, claiming that his wife, two sons and five other people had been captured by the Turks and that he needed to raise money in order to pay their ransoms and secure their release. Sixtus did what many popes before him had done and issued a letter of indulgence promising that anyone who gave money to Vranas to raise the ransom would be entitled to up to five years remission of penance.¹⁶

From Rome, Vranas set out to wander around Europe collecting contributions. Greeks bearing letters of indulgence like this were not an uncommon sight during the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. They are attested as far afield as Denmark and Spain, Scotland and Germany, and their indulgences all told much the same story of relatives in captivity and the need to raise a ransom. Indeed so common were they that suspicions were sometimes raised as to whether their claims were genuine. Michael Palaiologos, who was in the Low Countries in 1510, was taken for an Italian spy at Turnhout, and in spite of his claim that he was collecting alms to free captives and his possession of a papal indulgence, he was thrown into prison.¹⁷ George Vranas, however, does not seem to have experienced any such difficulties. By 1482, presumably after having traversed other European countries, he was in Ireland. There he was well treated by both the secular and the ecclesiastical authorities. He was formally given the protection of English law, which would have offered the right to seek justice in the Four Courts in Dublin.¹⁸ At the same time, Ottaviano de Spinelli, archbishop of Armagh (1478-1513), had Vranas'

16. Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Reg. Lat. 777, f. 40; A. MERCATI, "Documenti pontifici su persone e cose del mar Egeo e di Cipro poco dopo la caduta di Costantinopoli", in: *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 20 (1954), pp. 85-136, esp. 128-129.

17. Archives Départementales du Nord, Lille, B18834, no. 27231, ff. 307-307v (orig. B855, no. 27231); A. LE GLAY (ed.), *Inventaire-sommaire des archives départementales antérieures à 1790 (Nord)*, series B, vol. 1, pt. 2, Lille 1863, p. 63; HARRIS, *Greek Emigrés*, pp. 16-24.

18. E. TRESHAM (ed.), *Rotulorum Patentium et Clausorum Cancellariae Hiberniae Calendarium*, Dublin 1827, p. 270. In general on the extension of English law to Ireland, see J.H. BAKER, *An Introduction to English Legal History*, 3rd ed. London 1990, pp. 38-39.

papal indulgence copied into his episcopal register. This would suggest that the archbishop recognised its authenticity and gave the Greek permission to collect money in his province.¹⁹

Even so, there is something very perplexing as to why Vranas should wander so far from the beaten track and take the trouble of making the difficult journey to Ireland. The official reason, contained in the indulgence, was that Vranas was gathering alms to pay the ransom of his family. Yet Ireland was hardly a country that was renowned for its wealth and to add to the mystery, at some point during his stay, Vranas, for reasons that can only be guessed at, decided to take monastic vows. He became a canon of the Augustinian priory of All Saints in Dublin.²⁰ It is difficult to see how Vranas could have admitted to having a wife now that he was in holy orders. It may have been that he had received news that she was no longer alive and this might have prompted him to enter the priory. That is impossible to prove one way or another, but there is a possible reason for Vranas' decision to go to Ireland that will be advanced later on.

In spite of his monastic vows, Vranas did not remain in Dublin. In the spring of 1483, he was back in Rome, having possibly travelled there in the company of Archbishop Ottaviano. Once again he came to the attention of Sixtus IV, but this time in quite a different way. On 18 April 1483 Sixtus appointed him bishop of an Irish see, that of Dromore in the north of the island.²¹ The pope was so keen to appoint Vranas that he was prepared to overlook the fact that his candidate was only in very minor clerical orders at the time of his appointment. That lowly status was soon remedied. On 20 April, Vranas was made a subdeacon, then a deacon on the 23rd and a priest

19. M.A. SUGHI (ed.), *Registrum Octaviani alias Liber Niger: The Register of Octavian de Palatio, Archbishop of Armagh 1478-1513*, vol. 1, Dublin 1999, p. 96, vol. 2, Dublin 1999, pp. 472-473.

20. Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Reg. Lat. 827, ff. 273-275 and Oblig. et Solut. 83, f. 111v (orig. 84v); J.A. TWEMLOW (ed.), *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters, vol. 13, 1471-1484, Part II*, London 1955, p. 826. On All Saints Priory, see A. GWYNN and R.N. HANCOCK, *Medieval Religious Houses: Ireland*, London 1970, pp. 171-172.

21. Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Reg. Lat. 827, ff. 273-275, and Oblig. et Solut. 83, f. 111v (orig. 84v); TWEMLOW, *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers, vol. 13, Part II*, p. 826; EUBEL, vol. 2, p. 146; D. MCROBERTS, "The Greek bishop of Dromore", in: *Innes Review* 28 (1977), pp. 22-38, esp. 24.

on the 25th. Finally he was consecrated as bishop in a chapel of the church of San Lorenzo in Damaso on 4 May 1483.²²

At first sight it seems very odd that an Athenian Greek should be made an Irish bishop. Part of the reason no doubt lies in the unenviable nature of the appointment. Dromore was a remote and wretchedly impoverished see which could not provide a fraction of the rich revenues that bishoprics in Italy would yield. It covered an area where there was constant conflict between English settlers and Irish warlords and there was no settled secular government. Consequently no archbishop of Armagh had visited the see between 1417 and 1471 because it was considered too dangerous and over recent years Dromore had often been without a bishop at all.²³ There was, however, another factor. Irish sees such as Dromore were frequently used as what might be termed appointments of convenience. The bishop never actually visited his see, but he made use of the title to pursue his career elsewhere. Between 1410 and 1433, for example, an English Benedictine called John Chourles was bishop of Dromore. He spent that period in Canterbury, where he acted as a suffragan, doing the routine jobs to which the archbishop was too busy to attend. Indeed, by the time Chourles died three more bishops of Dromore had been appointed by the pope, all of whom worked as suffragans in English or Welsh dioceses, a much safer and more lucrative occupation than looking after the souls of the people of Dromore.²⁴

George Vranas' appointment to Dromore was no different. He does not seem to have returned to Ireland immediately after his consecration in Rome, for there is no record of his being there in the mid-1480s. In August 1485 he was certainly in Scotland, working as a suffragan at Arbroath. He is recorded as having consecrated a number of altars and ecclesiastical buildings in the town on behalf of the archbishop of St. Andrews.²⁵ He appears in the same role in England some years later.

22. Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Formatori 7, f. 89v; W.M. BRADY, *The Episcopal Succession in England, Scotland and Ireland, A.D. 1400-1875*, vol. 1, Rome 1876, pp. XXV-VI.

23. A. GWYNN, *The Medieval Province of Armagh*, Dundalk 1946, pp. 141-149; A. COSGROVE, "Ireland beyond the Pale, 1399-1460", in: A. COSGROVE (ed.), *A New History of Ireland. II: Medieval Ireland, 1169-1534*, Oxford 1987, pp. 569-590, esp. 584.

24. J. WATT, *The Church in Medieval Ireland*, Dublin 1972, pp. 192-193; COSGROVE, "Ireland beyond the Pale", p. 587.

25. C. INNIS (ed.), *Liber S. Thome de Aberbrothoc: Registrum Abbatie de Aberbrothoc* (Bannatyne Club 86), vol. 2, Edinburgh 1856, pp. 226-227; D. MACGREGOR, "Some fragments

In the spring of 1497 he was in London, where he performed several ordinations for Bishop Thomas Savage (1496-1501). The following year found him in Worcester, carrying out similar services on behalf of the absentee Italian bishop, Giovanni de'Gigli (1497-1498).²⁶ There is no evidence that he ever visited his own diocese at all. During the period of his tenure, papal letters concerning routine matters were invariably addressed to the archdeacons and canons rather than to the bishop.²⁷ To be fair, his absenteeism was in no way unusual by the standards of the time. During the same period, the diocese of Worcester was provided with a series of Italian bishops who seldom set foot in England, let alone in their see. Their function was to represent the king of England at the Papal Curia and the bishopric merely served to furnish them with the recompense for their labours.²⁸ For Vranas, his elevation as bishop was an investment, one for which he had had to pay out some thirty florins in service taxes.²⁹ He had to recoup that investment by accessing other sources of revenue.

Yet unlike John Chourles and his other predecessors, even if he never went to Dromore, George Vranas did at least ultimately return to Ireland. A note in Archbishop Ottaviano's register implies that he was there by the summer of 1487 and in July 1489 he attended a synod of the province of Armagh.³⁰ That does not mean, however, that Vranas was there to attend to the routine affairs of his diocese.

of ancient mss, discovered in the bindings of old books in the university library, Aberdeen", in: *Transactions of the Aberdeen Ecclesiological Society* 4 (1897-1905), pp. 6-9, esp. 8.

26. Guildhall Library, London, ms 9531/8, 3rd series, ff. 1v-3v; Hereford and Worcester Record Office, Worcester, 716.093 (BA 2648/7 iii), ff. 25-26; McROBERTS, "Greek bishop", p. 27.

27. J.A. TWEMLOW (ed.), *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters, vol. 14, 1484-1492*, London 1960, p. 297; M.J. HAREN (ed.), *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters, vol. 15, Innocent VIII, Lateran Registers, 1484-1492*, Dublin 1978, pp. 280, 434, 439-440, 451-452.

28. M. CREIGHTON, "The Italian bishops of Worcester", in: *Associated Architectural Societies Reports and Papers* 20 (1889-90), pp. 94-118; C.H. CLOUGH, "Three Gigli of Lucca in England during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries: diversification in a family of mercy merchants", in: L. VISSER-FUCHS (ed.), *Tant d'Emprises – So Many Undertakings: Essays in Honour of Anne F. Sutton, The Ricardian* 13 (2003), pp. 121-147, esp. 138-147.

29. Archivio di Stato, Rome, Camerale I, Quietanze 1131, f. 149 (orig. 136); BRADY, *Episcopal Succession*, vol. 1, p. 298.

30. SUGHI, *Registrum Octaviani*, vol. 1, pp. 102, 131, 143, vol. 2, pp. 503, 682, 743.

The synod of 1489 was held in the town of Ardee, some way to the south of Dromore and within the area of English settlement known as the Pale. Conditions there were rather more peaceful and settled than they were to the north and it is likely that Vranas remained inside the Pale for most of his time in Ireland.³¹ His activities there were connected with a particular project which probably explains why he was made an Irish bishop in the first place.

Sixtus IV, who had appointed Vranas to Dromore, had a favourite charity, the hospital of the Holy Spirit in Sassia. Founded by Pope Innocent III in 1201 on a site close to the Vatican, the hospital's task was to tend the sick and care for foundlings. There was also a confraternity whose members donated money to sustain the hospital's work. Branches of the hospital were established throughout Europe and the confraternity proved very popular, attracting a multi-national membership.³² When Sixtus became pope, he revived the confraternity, which had languished somewhat in recent years, and had the hospital buildings entirely renovated, commissioning the magnificent Sala Sistina which was decorated throughout with frescoes.³³ Sixtus seems also to have planned to extend the confraternity to parts of Europe in which hitherto it had been unrepresented. Two months after elevating Vranas to bishop, he appointed him Vicar Commissary and Factor of the Confraternity of the Holy Spirit with the power of enrolling new members and to raise funds for the construction of a hospital in Ireland. The new bishop was equipped with a seal bearing the words 'Sig. Georgii Branni Vicarii Generalis S. Spiritus' with which to stamp his authority.³⁴

31. On the Pale, see J. LYDON, *Ireland in the Later Middle Ages*, Dublin 1973, pp. 130-131; A. COSGROVE, "The emergence of the Pale, 1399-1447", in: A. COSGROVE (ed.), *A New History of Ireland. II: Medieval Ireland, 1169-1534*, Oxford 1987, pp. 533-556.

32. P. EGIDI (ed.), *Liber Fraternalitatis di Santo Spirito in Sassia*, in: *Necrologi e libri affini della provincia romana*, ed. P. EGIDI, vol. 2 (Fonti per la Storia d'Italia 45), Rome 1914, pp. 107-446; P. DE ANGELIS, *L'Ospedale di Santo Spirito in Saxia*, vol. 1, Rome 1960, pp. 205-224; IDEM, *L'Ospedale di Santo Spirito in Saxia e le sue filiali nel mondo*, Rome 1958; I. ORIGO, "The Hospital of the Holy Spirit", in: *History Today* 9 (1959), pp. 252-261.

33. LEE, *Sixtus IV*, pp. 137-142; E.D. HOWE, *Art and Culture at the Sistine Court: Platina's 'Life of Sixtus IV' and the Frescoes of the Hospital of Santo Spirito* (Studi e Testi 422), Vatican City 2005, pp. 73-99; DE ANGELIS, *Ospedale di Santo Spirito*, vol. 2, pp. 104-110.

34. Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Reg. Lat. 948, ff. 55v-56v; A.P. FULLER (ed.), *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters*, vol. 16,

The connection with the hospital of the Holy Spirit might not only explain why Vranas was appointed bishop of Dromore. It may also provide a clue as to why he had been in Ireland in the first place. In July 1483, not so long after Vranas' consecration, Archbishop Ottaviano of Armagh wrote from his diocese to one of the cardinals to complain about the selling of indulgences in Ireland for, among other causes, the hospital of the Holy Spirit in Rome. Those dispensing the indulgences had persuaded many of the uneducated peasants that if they paid the required fee they could then commit even the most heinous crime with impunity. Curiously, Ottaviano identified two groups who were responsible for hawking the indulgences in this way, Franciscan Observantist friars and Greek laymen.³⁵ The latter can hardly have included Vranas, who was no longer a layman and who had not had time to reach Ireland and begin his work for Sixtus' hospital. Yet it is curious that Ottaviano should single out Greeks. It is quite possible therefore that Vranas' association with Sixtus IV and with the hospital of the Holy Spirit predates his appointment as bishop of Dromore and the selling of indulgences for the hospital was behind his first appearance in Ireland in 1482. The Greeks complained about by Ottaviano may have been companions of his who had stayed behind while Vranas had travelled to Rome.

There may have been good reason why Greeks were to be found selling indulgences for the Roman hospital, for several prominent exiles from the East had been associated with it in the past. Cardinal Bessarion had become a member of the confraternity in 1446, long before Sixtus revived it. In March 1478, Charlotte Lusignan, queen of Cyprus, who was descended from the Palaiologoi on her mother's side, was also enrolled as a member.³⁶ When the Despot Thomas Palaiologos had fled to Rome in 1461, Pope Pius II (1458-1464) had

Alexander VI (1492-1503), Lateran Registers, Part I: 1492-1498, Dublin 1986, pp. 147-148; J. WARE, *De Praesulibus Hiberniae Commentarius a Prima Gentis Hibernicae ad Fidem Christianam Conversione ad nostra usque Tempora*, Dublin 1665, p. 93.

35. SUGHI, *Registrum Octaviani*, vol. 1, p. 120, vol. 2, pp. 617-618, at 617: "hiis diebus tantus existit ad Hiberniam indulgenciarum plenarie remissionis omnium peccatorum ac anni Iubilei et aliarum diversarum eciam hospitalis Sancti Spiritus in Saxia de urbe conflutus, quarum execucio interdum Grecis laicis, de quorum conversacione et cultu hic aliquando dubitatur, interdum fratribus ordinis Minorum sancti Francisci de Observancia nuncupati, quos pro monstro in Hibernia supradicta pecunias recipere ...".

36. EGIDI, *Liber Fraternitatis*, pp. 115, 143.

given him lodging in the hospital and it is likely that his children lived there too, for Andreas and Zoe are both depicted in the frescoes that adorn the Sala Sistina.³⁷ It may well have been, therefore, that the hospital played a role in housing other destitute refugees. That is certainly suggested in a draft letter of Archbishop Ottaviano on the selling of indulgences in Ireland in which he links indulgences for the crusade and the redemption of prisoners from the Turks with those for the Roman hospital.³⁸

It might have been that George Vranas himself and members of his family were among those refugees who benefited from the hospitality of this charity. An entry in the hospital's *Liber Fraternitatis* may suggest that. It records that in May 1482 a priest called 'Laurencius' was enrolled in the confraternity and that he was the son of George 'de Achina'. Given the tendency of 't' to be represented as 'c' in medieval Latin documents, this could be read as 'de Athina' or 'of Athens'. This Laurence might have been one of the sons of George who had been a prisoner but had been ransomed and brought to Rome, where he might have been lodged in the hospital.³⁹

Whatever the truth of Laurence's identity, Vranas proved to be very active in promoting the cause of the hospital of the Holy Spirit in Ireland. Irish names, such as James Comford and Raymond Ginte of Waterford diocese, and John of Limerick, start to appear among the members of the confraternity. It is interesting too that it was also during Vranas' tenure of Dromore, in November 1494, that the self-proclaimed ruler of Ireland, Henry VII of England (1485-1509), became a member of the confraternity along with his wife Elizabeth, although there is no way of knowing whether the Athenian bishop was involved in that.⁴⁰

37. PIUS II (AENEAS SILVIUS PICCOLOMINI), *Commentaries*, trans. F.A. GRAGG and L.C. GABEL, Northampton MA 1936-57, pp. 377-378; V. FORCELLA, *Iscrizioni delle chiese e d'altri edifici di Roma*, vol. 6, Rome 1875, no. 1286, p. 416; P. DE ANGELIS, *L'architetto e gli affreschi di Santo Spirito in Sassia*, Rome 1961, pp. 265-266.

38. SUGHI, *Registrum Octaviani*, vol. 2, pp. 616-617: "... tam ad opus cruciate quam ad redempcionem captivorum per Turcos, et ad Hospitale sancti spiritus in saxia de Urbe ...".

39. EGIDI, *Liber Fraternitatis*, p. 334. On 'Athina' for Athens, see: J.G.T. GRAESSE, F. BENEDICT, and H. & S.-C. PLECHL, *Orbis Latinus: Lexikon lateinischer geographischer Namen des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit*, vol. 1, Braunschweig 1972, p. 168.

40. EGIDI, *Liber Fraternitatis*, pp. 141, 314.

As far as building the hospital was concerned, progress was slow. It had still not come into being by 1493 when Vranas had to secure a renewal of his licence from the new pope, Alexander VI (1492-1503). Papal indulgences for the new hospital were then publicised throughout Ireland.⁴¹ In spite of the delay, it would seem that the project was ultimately successful and the Irish hospital was finally constructed at Trim on the river Boyne near Dublin, well within the Pale. There is, however, no contemporary information about this institution and its existence is only known at all from a document from the following century. In 1591, after the English Reformation, the master of the hospital of the Holy Spirit in Rome was making efforts to retrieve the confraternity's confiscated property in England and Ireland. He included on his list the hospital and house of the Holy Spirit at Trim in the diocese of Meath, which he specifically stated had been founded on the orders of Sixtus IV by George Vranas, bishop of Dromore.⁴² The buildings of the hospital still stood at that time and probably well into the seventeenth century when James Usher, archbishop of Armagh (1625-1656), recorded that the people of Trim called one of their ecclesiastical buildings 'the Greek church'. It is likely that this building was the former hospital and that its name reflected a dim memory of its founder, who was, after all, known to the Irish of his day as *espoc gregag*, the Greek bishop.⁴³ Even after the building disappeared, the site close to the Navan Gate in the town's walls was still visible at the end of the nineteenth century and a small bronze crucifix of the fifteenth or sixteenth century was found there. Since then the area has been built over and all traces of what might have been Vranas' hospital have been lost.⁴⁴

In all this, George Vranas comes across as a dedicated servant of Sixtus IV and his successors who carried out his duties faithfully in

41. Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Reg. Lat. 948, ff. 55v-56v; A.P. FULLER (ed.), *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland: vol. 16*, pp. 147-148; SUGHI, *Registrum Octaviani*, vol. 1, pp. 54, 135, vol. 2, pp. 241, 706-708.

42. DE ANGELIS, *L'Ospedale di Santo Spirito in Saxia e le sue filiali nel mondo*, pp. 221, 245-246.

43. A.M. FREEMAN (ed.), *The Annals of Connacht*, Dublin 1944, p. 675; J. USHER, *Veterum Epistolarum Hibernicarum Sylloge*, Dublin 1632, p. 132.

44. E. EVANS, *Trim: Its Ecclesiastical Ruins, its Castle etc.*, Dublin 1886, pp. 10-11; J. HEALY, "Notice of a crucifix found at Trim", in: *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 10 (1900), p. 176.

conditions that cannot have been easy. At the same time, however, he was also climbing the career ladder. In April 1499 he was translated to the see of Elphin, although the position seems to have been vacated for him by the previous incumbent, Nicholas O'Flanagan, as early as September 1494. Elphin was well outside the English Pale, but it was a much more settled and peaceful see than Dromore and therefore a great deal richer, yielding an annual income of 150 ducats.⁴⁵ Again, it is extremely unlikely that Vranas ever went to his diocese. The routine tasks of its administration were delegated to others and, as in the case of Dromore, papal letters were always addressed to the dean and canons rather than to the bishop.⁴⁶ One of the canons of Elphin, Cornelius O'Kelly (or Ocellyd, as he is called in papal letters), seems to have carried out some of the bishop's functions. In 1523, for example, when a provincial synod was called at Galway, Cornelius attended in the bishop's place.⁴⁷ By that time, Elphin had acquired another bishop, in spite of the fact that Vranas was still alive. In 1508, Christopher Fisher was appointed to the see, followed by John Maxey in 1525. Maxey adhered to the established practise of never visiting his see and he worked as a suffragan in York.⁴⁸

Given his absenteeism, it is not surprising that Vranas was not a very popular bishop of Elphin. Irish chronicles comment sourly that he was no great asset to humanity.⁴⁹ Such hostility is unlikely to have worried him too much, because by 1525 Vranas had long since ceased to live in Ireland and had moved to Scotland. He now resided in

45. Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Acta Camerarii 1, f. 95v (orig. 73v) and Oblig. Communes 12, f. 32v; SUGHI, *Registrum Octaviani*, vol. 1, p. 138, vol. 2, pp. 720-722; BRADY, *Episcopal Succession*, vol. 2, p. 197; A.P. FULLER (ed.), *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters, vol. 17, part I, Alexander VI (1492-1503), Lateran Registers, Part II: 1495-1503*, Dublin 1994, pp. 378-380; EUBEL, vol. 2, p. 150; MCROBERTS, "Greek bishop", pp. 28-29.

46. FULLER, *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers, vol. 17, part I*, pp. 517, 582, 613.

47. M.J. HAREN (ed.), *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters, vol. 18, Pius III and Julius II, Vatican Registers, 1503-1513, Lateran Registers, 1503-1508*, Dublin 1989, p. 454; J. LYNCH, *De Praesulibus Hiberniae*, 2 vols., Dublin 1944, vol. 2, p. 230.

48. E.B. FRYDE, D.E. GREENWAY, S. PORTER, and I. ROY, *Handbook of British Chronology*, London 1986, p. 353.

49. FREEMAN, *Annals of Connacht*, p. 675; W.M. HENNESSY (ed.), *The Annals of Loch Cé: A Chronicle of Irish Affairs from AD 1014 to AD 1590*, vol. 2, London 1871, pp. 272-275.

Edinburgh, where he may have acted as suffragan, although there is no evidence for it. In any case, he had another source of income in the properties which he had acquired in Edinburgh. He owned a number of these, including a chapel, some houses and a plot of vacant land on Castlehill.⁵⁰ He seems to have enjoyed a long and prosperous retirement, dying at an advanced age, probably in 1529. This date can be deduced from the fact that the deceased bishop of Elphin's property was granted by the king of Scotland to one of his subjects on 27 December 1529.⁵¹

Vranas' success takes some accounting for. After all, he was a complete outsider, a penniless refugee, who none the less managed to mount the career ladder and survive the cut-throat politics of the curia. The answer may well be that he knew how the system worked. To take one example, during the fifteenth century, the volume of business passing through the papal curia had grown so vast that the practice grew up that some concessions could be obtained directly from the pope's secretaries. Rather than going through the tedious process of having a bull drawn up and signed by the pope, the same routine matter could be dealt with in a short letter drawn up by a secretary without the pope's signature (*per breve absque signatura*). Obviously you had to reward the secretary, but it was a good deal cheaper than getting a bull.⁵² In the later fifteenth century this system was only slowly developing and not everyone knew that you could get what you wanted so easily. George Vranas, however, did know. In the autumn of 1492, when he was looking for a papal confirmation and indult connected with his work for the hospital of the Holy Spirit in Ireland, he obtained the necessary letters from Rome. The copies of these letters in the papal registers show that they were expedited "per breve".⁵³

50. J.B. PAUL and J.M. THOMSON (eds.), *The Register of the Great Seal of Scotland, 1513-1546*, Edinburgh 1883, no. 872, p. 191, no. 1300, p. 284; JOHN FOULAR, *The Protocol Book*, ed. W. MCLEOD, M. WOOD, and G. DONALDSON (Scottish Record Society, 64, 72, 74, 75, vol. 2 & 3), Edinburgh 1953, p. 235; McROBERTS, "Greek bishop", pp. 30-31.

51. PAUL-THOMSON, *Register of the Great Seal*, no. 872, p. 191; McROBERTS, "Greek bishop", pp. 30-32.

52. P. PARTNER, *The Pope's Men: The Papal Civil Service in the Renaissance*, Oxford 1990, pp. 27-28; G. BARRACLOUGH, *The Medieval Papacy*, London 1968, pp. 188-190.

53. Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Reg. Suppl. 963, ff. 191v-192, 964, f. 264 (orig. 266); A.P. FULLER (ed.), *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters, vol. 17, part II, Alexander VI (1492-1503), Vatican Registers, 1492-1503*, Dublin 1994, p. cxxxiv.

To that extent, therefore, Vranas was an insider. Though he was far from Rome, he needed the curia to provide him with his authority and ultimately to promote him to Elphin. Therefore he had to play the system, even at long distance. His career shows just how far a Greek with no powerful backers could go in the Roman Church, if he did just that. Everything he did shows that he had learned the system well and consequently, unlike Andronicus Kallistos and Andreas Palaiologos, he was able to maintain his comfortable position to the last.