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Learning Greek in the Renaissance: the Case of the Greek *Donatus*

This paper intends to analyze some aspects of the teaching of Greek in Humanist schools through a text until now generally neglected: a Greek translation of *Ianua* or *Donatus*, the handbook commonly used in the Middle Ages to teach elementary Latin, wrongly identified with Aelius Donatus' *Ars minor*. The handbook is in question-and-answer format and deals with the eight parts of speech.

The Greek *Donatus* was not deemed worthy of a printed edition during the Renaissance. The failure of this isolated attempt to create a Greek grammar within an exclusively Latin tradition demonstrates how fundamental the interaction between the Eastern and the Western culture was for the shaping of Greek studies in the West.

In 1397, the Byzantine scholar Manuel Chrysoloras moved to Florence to teach Greek. His appointment was hailed by the first Humanists as the dawn of a new age. All the previous attempts to establish the study of ancient Greek in the West had failed because of the lack of an appropriate teaching methodology for non-native speakers, as well as of grammar books and dictionaries designed for this purpose. In his successful grammar book, entitled *Erotemata*, 'Questions,' Chrysoloras drew on Byzantine schedography as well as on the Latin *Donatus*: he presented Greek morphology through a sequence of questions and answers and replaced the traditional fifty-six nominal declensions with the 'Latinized' scheme of five declensions, based on the endings of the nominative and the genitive singular combined.

Conceived perhaps as a Greek translation of the Latin elementary handbook for Greeks who wanted to learn Latin by themselves, the Greek *Donatus* became a textbook for Westerners interested in learning ancient Greek. The text is entirely in Greek and definitions and paradigms are given correctly. However, Greek morphology is adapted to fit in the Latin grammatical categories to such an extent that, for example, Greek nouns have six cases, and Greek verbs have a gerund, a gerundive, and a supine.

The eleven manuscripts handing down the Greek *Donatus* are mostly connected with Venice and date from the fifteenth century. The translation, wrongly attributed to Maximus Planudes, may have been made in Venice or in a bilingual environment, such as Crete. Three manuscripts copied by the same hand suggest that the Greek *Donatus* was used in a classroom.

Like the Latin original, the Greek *Donatus* was probably memorized in full. The text is usually written in columns or with wide margins. Punctuation makes memorization easier by dividing sentences and paragraphs into short units. Often a Latin translation of single words or of entire passages is written alongside, in the interlinear spaces, or in the margins of the Greek text. Greek, being a language of culture reserved for few privileged students, continued to be taught in Latin, whereas the increase in the use of vernacular languages heavily influenced the teaching of Latin from the fourteenth century onwards.