

Michael the Grammarian's irony about *hypsilon*

A step towards reconstructing Byzantine pronunciation

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Michael the Grammarian's satire on the metropolitan of Philomelion (poem IV Mercati) can be dated to the middle of the eleventh century and allows one to prove that the letter of the Greek alphabet, *hypsilon*, was still pronounced by some part of the Byzantine population as a French "u" or a German "ü" by that time.¹ The dating of the poem had created a debate² recently reconsidered by Marc LAUXTERMANN. A. PAPADOPOULOS-KERAMEUS incorrectly identified the poet with Michael Glykas (XII century),³ while S. G. MERCATI rightly adduces stylistic reasons to place him in the XI century.⁴ Sp. LAMPROS pointed out that Michael in another poem refers to a certain Lukoleon who is also mentioned by the Christopher Mytilenaios (XI century).⁵ Most recently M. LAUXTERMANN has pointed out that Leon hold the title of *Vestes*, which was in use from the end of the tenth to end of the eleventh centuries.⁶ One may add that Metropolitan Philip of Amorion

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¹ Edited by S. G. Mercati, *Ancora intorno a Μιχαήλ γραμματικὸς ὁ ἱερομόναχος*, in: *Collectanea Bizantina*, vol. 1, Bari 1970, 128-131 as poem IV. The text and my translation can be found in the appendix to this article.

² A. KAŽDAN in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (further *ODB*) 1368 claimed that Michael the Grammarian was 'a poet of uncertain date and unknown biography'.

³ A. PAPADOPOULOS-KERAMEUS, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* (further *BZ*) 20 (1911) 131. The reason for placing Michael in the twelfth century is a reference to a Michael Grammatikos who is praised in the *Typikon* of the Theotokos Kosmosoteira edited by Gedeon, *Ekklesiastike Aletheia* 12 (1898).

⁴ *BZ* 12 (1903) 321-323 and *BZ* 17 (1908) 403; S. G. Mercati (ed.), 1970, vol. 1, 127.

⁵ *Στίχοι Μιχαήλ γραμματικοῦ εἰς τὸν Ἐφέσου ἐλθόντα καὶ εὐρόντα τὸν Λυκολέοντα νεκρόν* (I. tit. Mercati, p. 115); E. KURTZ, *Die Gedichte Christophoros Mytilenaios*, Leipzig 1903, poem 68; Sp. LAMPROS, *Neos Ellenomnemon* 14 (1917) 4.

⁶ *Λέοντα Βέστον, τὸν μέγιστον, τὸν πάνυ* (Mercati I.19, 116); *Βέστου Λέοντος, ὄνπερ οὐ κρύψει χρόνος* (Mercati VIII.4, 135); M. D. Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres. Text and Contexts* (= *Wiener Byzantinische Studien* 24/1), Vienna 2003, 319.

mentioned at lines 40-41⁷ appears in the synod decree against the Syro-Jacobites written by Patriarch Alexios Stoudites (1022-1043) for the year 1030.⁸ This is decisive proof to place Michael the monk in the first half of the eleventh century and specifically around the year 1030.

Establishing a more precise date for a poem is important, though in this case it is especially significant since it yields further chronological data concerning the pronunciation of Greek in the middle ages. The victim of the poem, the bishop of Philomelion, believes that the villagers he grew up with were uncultured because they did the following mistakes:

- 1) pronouncing *κρίον* instead of *κρύον* (line 20)
- 2) pronouncing *ξύλον* instead of *ξύλον* (line 21)

These two ‘errors’ reveal that there was a distinction in pronunciation between the letters hypsilon (*v*) and iota (*i*).⁹ Such information is also confirmed in Church Slavonic. Traditionally it is deemed that the Slavonic alphabet was invented in the ninth century.¹⁰ In this early written stage, it is supposed that the Slavonic vowel-system did not allow for the development of a sound such as a German “ü” or a French “u”.¹¹ However both Church Slavonic alphabets add a letter to represent the letter *hypsilon* in loan words from Greek. This letter is known as the *izitsa* (Glagolitic **Ѣ**, Cyrillic **ѣ**). It is used exclusively in Greek words imported into slavonic¹² and P. DIELS suspected that it may represent a Greek sound such as “ü”.¹³ The problem would be solved, if at the time of the

⁷ Ἀμωρίον πρόεδρος ἐστὶ τις, φίλε | Φίλιππος, οὐ μέγιστον ἐν βίῳ κλέος (Mercati IV.40-41, 129).

⁸ Φίλιππον Ἀμωρίων: G. FICKER, *Erlasse des Patriarchen von Konstantinopel Alexios Studites*, Kiel 1911, 20.2. The reference was found using the online *Prosopography of the Byzantine World* (www.pbw.kcl.ac.uk). Philip of Amorion is classified as Philippos 101.

⁹ G. HORROCKS, *Greek: A History of the Language and its Speakers*, London – New York 1997, 2005; W. HÖRANDNER, *Zur Kommunikativen Funktion byzantinischer Gedichte*, in: XVIII International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Major Papers, Moscow 1991, 418.

¹⁰ B. GASPAROV, *Old Church Slavonic*, Munich 2001, 18-19 for a clear introduction to the complex question. Also C. DIELS, *Altkirchenslavische Grammatik*, Heidelberg 1932, 19-48.

¹¹ The vowel system is described by B. GASPAROV, *Old Church Slavonic*, 47-52, especially p. 51 which explains the lack of “u” in OCS and its subsequent reintroduction.

¹² P. DIELS, *Altkirchenslavische Grammatik*, 27-29, note 8; B. GASPAROV, *Old Church Slavonic*, 14 points out that the *izitsa* was among the letters employed almost exclusively for words imported from Greek.

¹³ P. DIELS, *Altkirchenslavische Grammatik*, 27-29, note 8, especially p. 29: “Dass dem griech. *v* ausser den Lautwerten *i* und *u* stellenweise auch der Lautwert *ü* beilegt werden konnte, lässt die Art vermuten, wie Supr. In einigen Fällen *Y* in slavischen wörten verwendet”. A. VAILLANT, *Manuel du Vieux Slave*, Paris 1964, 32. There Vaillant claims that the *hypsilon* could no longer have the sound *ü*, however on the same page he claims that there were regional variations in the Greek pronunciation of the letter.

creation of the Glagolitic and Cyrillic alphabets the Byzantines still pronounced the hyp̄silon (*v*) as “ü” and therefore in a manner distinctly different either from iota (*i*) or ita (*η*). DIELS pointed out that that Greek words which have an *hyp̄silon* are transcribed with either an “u” or an “i” depending on the place of writing of the manuscript. He based his observation mainly on the famous *Supraliensis* manuscript and points out that there the *ižitsa* is often replaced by the letter “u” and not “i”. This would confirm that the *ižitsa* represented a sound which was intermediary between “i” and “u”.¹⁴ This phenomenon was also noted in later glagolitic manuscripts Dalmatia.¹⁵ The poem of monk Michael with its clear distinction between *iota* and *hyp̄silon* finally confirms the suspicion of Slavic linguists that the *ižitsa* effectively represented a distinct sound which was marked by the letter *hyp̄silon* in Greek and represented the sound “ü”. Thus two independent arguments establish that the Greek *hyp̄silon* was pronounced as “ü” around the year 1030 in Anatolia.

There is an important consequence to this argument, connected with Modern Greek dialects from Anatolia. If the *hyp̄silon* was pronounced as “ü” rather than “i” by some part of the Byzantine population, one may suspect that some Anatolian Greek dialects, such as Cappadocian, which retained this feature long after the eleventh century, did not import it from Turkish as has been conjectured. On the contrary, it would seem that the contact with Turkish which actively uses the sound ü would have strengthened a feature which disappeared in other dialectal areas of Greek. One may no longer associate the different vowel system as simply deriving from Turkish, but rather reinforced by it.¹⁶

Another important consequence may be connected with codicology. If indeed the *hyp̄silon* was not confused with an *iota* or an *eta* at a given time and place, especially before the eleventh century, then one may make distinctions in the areas where such confusions arise. In other words one may reduce the geographic area of iotacism which also includes the letter *hyp̄silon*. Consequently one may add another criterion to assess the provenance or even date of certain manuscripts.

Thus the pronunciation of the Byzantine Greek alphabet cannot conform entirely either to the various reconstructed pronunciations established by Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) or to the contemporary Greek pronunciation defended by Reuchlin (1455-1522). Instead one may use the evidence of contemporary literature combined with that of neighbouring languages in order to establish an approximate chronology in the evolution of pronunciation. This may also facilitate the appre-

¹⁴ P. DIELS, *Altkirchenslavische Grammatik*, 6, note 8, 20, 22.

¹⁵ A. VAILLANT, *Manuel du Vieux Slave*, 32.

¹⁶ For a description of the sounds of Cappadocian see N. KONTOSOPOULOS, *Διάλεκτοι και ιδιώματα της νέας Ελληνικής*, Athens 1994, 6-9 especially p.8.

ciation of the aural aspect of middle Byzantine writing as well as being a step towards establishing a more genuinely ‘Byzantine’ pronunciation of Greek in the middle ages. Finally one should add that the discrepancy which emerges between two different contemporary pronunciations of the same letter, point to the need of further study in the realm of regionalism as well as possible social distinction based on manner of speech within the Byzantine empire.

Appendix 1

ὦ δέσποτα, πρόεδρε Φιλομηλίου,
 ἀφωνίας βοῦν οἶδα τῇ γλώσση φέρεις
 μᾶλλον δέ τις βοῦς ἀυτόχρημα τυγχάνεις.
 πλὴν ἀλλὰ τὴν σὴν ἐκβιάζον μοι φύσιν
 καὶ τὸν σὸν ἐκδίβασκε θαρρούντως βίον. (5)
 ποία μὲν ἢ θρέψασα πατρίς σε φράσον,
 ποίων δὲ καὶ προῆλθες ἐκ γεννητόρων.
 ποθῶ μαθεῖν δὲ καὶ διδασκάλους τίνας
 ὁ κλεινὸς εὐτυχήσας, ἀλλὰ καὶ πλέον
 τίς ὁ χρίσας σε καὶ καθιδρύσας θρόνῳ (10)
 ἀποστόλων φεῦ τὸν λιθῶδη τὰς φρένας,
 καὶ θρεμμάτων δείξας σε Χριστοῦ ποιμένα,
 τὸν ὄντα μᾶλλον εὐφυᾶ βοηλάτην.
 θεὸν γὰρ εἰπὼν καὶ κεραυνὸν προσδόκα·
 ναὶ ταῦτα μοι, βόσκημα, δήλωσον τάχος, (15)
 ὡς παντὶ βίῳ σε κηρύξω μέγαν,
 ἴσους πλέκων σοι τοὺς ἐπαινους τοῖς τρόποις.
 «Ἐμοὶ πατρίς, βέλτιστε, τραχὺ χωρίον,
 ὅπου περ ἀνδρῶν καὶ βοῶν ἴσαι φρένες,
 οἱ τὸ κρύον λέγουσιν ἀφρόνως κρίον, (20)
 καὶ τὸ ξύλον λέγουσιν ἀγροίκως ξίλον,
 † ἔχων νὲ δ' αὐθις † ἀντὶ τοῦ παραντίκα.
 Ὡς οὖν προῆλθον μητρικῆς ἐκ νήδυος
 – τίνες γὰρ οἱ φύσαντες αἰδοῦμαι λέγειν –
 καὶ τοῦ νεάζειν τοῖς χρόνοις ἐπαυσάμην, (25)
 ἐν βουκόλοις ἦν εὐθύς ἠριθμημένος,
 πῆραν δὲ καὶ κώθωνας ἐξηρητημένος
 βόας νέμων ἦν καὶ γάλακτος ἐσθίων,
 σιτούμενος δὲ καὶ τυροῦς ὑπὲρ κόρον.
 Ὅρᾳς ὁποίας σάρκας ἐξεθρεψάμην· (30)
 ὄρᾳς ὅπως μέγιστος εἰμὶ καὶ πίων,
 ὦμους περιττοὺς καρτερωτάτους ἔχων.
 Βουγάϊον γοῦν, εἴτε βουθοίαν νέον

καλῶν μέ τις κάλλιστα τοῦ σκοποῦ τύχη.
Ἦ πάντα βοῦς ἔγωγε πλὴν μυκημάτων· (35)
ὀγκώμενος γάρ εἰμι τὴν φωνὴν ὄνος.
Καὶ ταῦτα μὲν δὴ ταῦτα τοῦ πρώτου βίου.
Πῶς δὴ παρήλθον τάξιν εἰς ἐπισκόπων,
ἄκουε καὶ θαύμαζε τὴν εὐβουλίαν.
Ἄμωρίου πρόεδρος ἐστί τις, φίλε, (40)
Φίλιππος, οὐ μέγιστον ἐν βίῳ κλέος,
ἄκρος † μοναὶ † σκληραγωγίας φίλος,
διδασκάλων ἄριστος ἐν τοῖς πρακτέοις.
Φροντὶς γὰρ αὐτῷ μικρὰ τῆς θεωρίας,
φιλεῖ δὲ πρᾶξιν πρακτικωτάτως ἔχων. (45)
Κἂν εἰ μόνον σταίῃ τις αὐτοῦ <—υ—>,
ἄπεισιν εὐθύς — φεῦ βοῶν τῶν ὠδίνων.
Τούτῳ προσελθὼν καὶ νομισθεὶς αὐτίκα
πρόχειρος, ὀξύς, εὐφυῆς ὑπερέτης
καὶ πορνοβοσκὸς ἐν μεσημβρία βίου, (50)
ὑπουργὸς ἦν ἕτοιμος ἐξηλεγμένος,
κοινωνὸς αὐτῷ τῶν ἀπορρήτων μόνος.
Πρὸς παρθένους οὖν, ἀλλὰ καὶ χήρας νέας
ἐστελλόμεν προθύμος, αἷς λόγους φέρων
ἐξηπάτων, ἔκλεπτον αὐτάς ἐντέχνως (55)
ταῖς ῥημάτων ἴνυξιν ὡς μάγων τέχναις.
Ἦ <—> ποθεινὸς οὐ μόνον δεσπότη
ἀλλ' οὐκ ἔλαττον ταῖς φίλαις τοῦ δεσπότου,
ὡς οὐ βραχεῖαν προξενῶν αὐταῖς χάριν,
οὐδ' ἄνδρα μικρὸν, ἀλλὰ τὴν πρᾶξιν μέγαν (60)
<—υ—> εὐκίνητον, ἠδὺν ἐκτόπως.
Τούτων δὲ τις τείνουσα μισθὸν μοι μία,
ἦ πᾶσι δῆλη, κἂν ἐγὼ κρύπτειν θέλω
ἔπιπτεν, ἰκέτευεν, ἐξελιπάρει,
τῷ δεσπότη προὔτεινεν ἰκετηρίαν, (65)
ἔτυπτεν αὐτοῦ καὶ παρειὰς ἔσθ' ὄτε,
καὶ τὴν γέννυ ἐτιλλεν ἐξαρνουμένου,
ἔως με τὸν πάντολμον, ὃν φθάσοι λίθος,
λέξας τι χρηστὸν εἶτα καὶ πράξας μέγα,
ὦ μηδὲ χηνῶν ἦν προηγείσθαι θέμις, (70)
ὡς παντάλασιν ἐστερημέν λόγου
καὶ μηδὲ σφᾶς τὰς φρένας κεκτημένω,
πρόεδρον — ὦ πρόνοια θεοῦ καὶ δίκη —
τοῦ δυστυχοῦς ἔδειξε τοῦδε χωρίου.
ἰππάζομαι καὶ μὲν τρυφῷ καθ' ἡμέραν, (75)
νύκτωρ δὲ μοι σύννοϊδε νύξ τὰ πρακτέα,
καὶ χρέμπτομαι μὲν ταῖς τραπέζαις πλουσιῶν,

ἀγροικίας μοι τοῦ θράσους ἡγουμένης,
πέμπω δ' ἔρυγὰς ἀγγέλους λαιμαργίας,
φρονῶ δὲ καὶ μέγιστον οὐ προεδρία, (80)
τέχνη δὲ τῇ πρὶν καὶ τρόπων μοχθηρία,
σεμνοπροσωπῶν καὶ γενειάδα τρέφων,
πελώριος κύκλωψ τις, ὠμηστής λέων,
πάντων προτιμῶν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γαστέρα
καὶ κορδακισμοῖς προσφιλῆς ὧν καὶ μέθαις, (85)
πολὺς τὸ σῶμα, τὸν δὲ νοῦν καὶ τὸν λόγον
πωγωνίας ὅμοιος εὐπόκοις τράγοις.
Αὔτη κορωνίς τοῦ καθ' ἡμᾶς σου βίου.
Ἦκουσας ὧν ἤτησας ὧν ἦρας, φίλε,
ἔγνωσ τὰ πολλὰ τῶν ἐμῶν τολμημάτων. (90)
Σὺ δ' αὐτὰ μοι τήρησον ἐμμέτροις λόγοις
καὶ τοῖς μεθ' ἡμᾶς εἰς ἀεὶ σῶζε χρόνοις.»

*Master and metropolitan of Philomelion,
I recognize your tongue is silent like an ox,
But now you are becoming more like an ox yourself.
However, force your nature for me
And courageously explain your life. (5)
Tell me which nation reared you
And from which parents you descend.
I desire to learn also which teachers
You found, famous one, and
who anointed you and installed you on the throne (10)
Of the apostles, alas you who have a brick-like brain.
Who pointed you out as Christ's shepherd of creatures,
Though you are simply an ox driver.
If you call on God, expect thunder.
Aye, so tell me quickly, you cattle (15)
So that I will proclaim you as great for my whole life,
And weave praises appropriate to your behaviour.
“Dear friend, my fatherland is a rugged village,
Where the minds of men and oxen are equal.
They, ignorant ones, say krion instead of kryon (20)
They, provincials, say xilon instead of xylon.
They say euthis instead of immediately.
So I came from my mother's womb
– I am ashamed to say who were my ancestors –
And when, with the years, I stopped to be a child, (25)
I was immediately numbered among the shepherds,*

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*I had a prod and cups,
I drove oxen and consumed milk,
And eat too much cheese.
You see what flesh I have developed: (30)
You see how huge and fat I am,
And what wide and strong shoulders I have.
If someone called me a great ox
or a new befeater, he would not be wrong.
I am truly an ox in everything except the lowing, (35)
Since I sound like an overloaded donkey.
And this was so during my early life.
Listen and admire the cleverness
Of how I joined the rank of bishops.
Dear friend, there is a metropolitan of Amorion (40)
Philip, whose fame is greatest among the living,
He is an extreme follower of ascetic practice
The best teacher of what must be done.
For his wisdom is close to his theory.
However, in practical terms he loves action. (45)
If someone only approaches him (...),
He will go away immediately, crying 'alas, what sufferings'.
If someone went to him, he was immediately considered
A handy, sharp and good natured servant
And a procurer of prostitutes in the daylight of life. (50)
I was chosen as ready servant
And alone shared his secrets.
So to maidens and young widows
I was sent eagerly bearing them letters
And I used to deceive and kidnap them artfully (55)
By the charms of words, as if by tricks of magicians.
However I was loved not only by my lord,
But, not in the least, by my master's girl friends,
since I announced them the favour, not small,
Not an insignificant man, but great in deed, (60)
Sensible and extremely sweet.
One of these women used to offer me money.
Everyone knew her and even when I wanted to conceal her
She fell, prayed and insisted
And offered supplications for my master. (65)
Once she beat him and his cheeks
And she pulled his beard even though he refused her request
To the point that even a stone hit poor me.
He said something good and did something great
With which it is not licit to lead geese (70)*

Frederick Lauritzen

*Since I was completely devoid of reason
And did not have a sane mind:
He made me metropolitan of this unfortunate
Village – Oh predestination and justice of God! –
I ride a horse and I am rich during the day, (75)
And the night conspires with me on what should be done.
And I spit on the tables of the rich
My savagery being considered boldness
I send wind as messengers of my gluttony.
I consider it most serious not because I am a metropolitan (80)
but because of the previous art and the corruption of morals.
I bear a serious face and grow a beard,
A savage Cyclops, a lion which eats raw meat.
I prefer above all my stomach
And I like dances and drunkenness. (85)
I am large in body, mind and speech
And have hair similar to that of fleecy goats.
This is the essence of my life.
You have listened to what you asked for and which you raised, my friend.
You recognized many of my exploits. (90)
Now put them into metre
And preserve it forever for future years.”*