

Oxford and the Greek Church in Venice

In a brief letter, Dr Noemi Magri examines one claim in 'Monstrous Adversary', Alan Nelson's book.

'Orazio reports that he [Oxford] was a great lover of music and attended churches including the Greek Church – notorious for attracting religious dissidents, with services in Latin (not Greek). Orazio testifies further that Oxford was a fluent speaker of both Italian and Latin.' (page 137)

The Church of St. George of the Greeks (San Giorgio dei Greci) is one of the most interesting monuments in Venice. It is not far from St Mark's (you will easily find it on a town map). It was, and is, the most important Greek Orthodox church in Europe: it is worth a visit.

It was inaugurated in 1573, so De Vere saw it in all its splendour. Its library has held incunabula, manuscripts and books since then. It was a centre of Greek and Renaissance learning. Next to it there was one of the first printing-presses set up in Venice: in it, they printed books in Greek, mainly.

In Prof Nelson's biography of De Vere, the sentence quoted above needs to be emended.

As for Oxford, Orazio reports that he was a great lover of music. This is false: nowhere in the testimony does Orazio report this, even though it is well known that Oxford was an expert of music. The only reference to music made by Orazio has to do with Ambroso da Venezia who is a musician of the Queen of England and there are also five Venetian brothers who are musicians of the Queen and play the flute and the viola.

He attended churches. This is not quite correct. Orazio only said that Oxford used to go to Mass at the Church of the Greeks. No other churches are mentioned.

Notorious for attracting religious dissidents. This is a groundless statement. The place had become a

cultural centre. El Campo dei Greci (Square of the Greeks) where the church is standing was a meeting place of literary men. The Greeks who had emigrated to Venice after the fall of Constantinople (1453) had asked and obtained permission from, the Venetian Government to found a Greek community and build their own church in order to perform their rites according to the Greek-Orthodox liturgy.

The first church, St Nicholass, was built in 1511; later on, the Greeks were given a larger area in the borough of Castello to build their new church of St George of the Greeks, the one we can see now. In Venice, the Greek-Orthodox community had always enjoyed freedom; they were honoured and respected.

They were not persecuted because the Venetian Government was rather tolerant in religious matters, and, as a consequence, they were not considered religious dissidents; it is not true that the place was notorious for attracting religious dissidents, on the contrary, as I said, it was famous for being a cultural centre.

It was the Vatican who persecuted the Greek Orthodox, not Venetian Authorities. The Vatican considered all those who were not Roman Catholic as heretics.

with services in Latin (not Greek). This is wrong. The Mass (not service) was, and still is, said in Greek. There are many publications in English about the Greek-Orthodox liturgy. It should not be difficult to verify this.

Oxford was a fluent speaker of both Italian and Latin. This appears to be the only correct sentence in the three lines quoted.

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