

Scott Kennedy

Bessarion's date of birth: a new assessment of the evidence

Abstract: The cardinal Bessarion was a foremost figure of the Italian Renaissance and late Byzantium. However, some of the details of his life are not yet securely established, especially his date of birth. Over the last century, scholars have proposed dates ranging from 1400 to 1408. In this study, I critically interrogate the two most commonly accepted dates (1400 and 1408). In the past, scholars have relied on the age requirements of canon law or the testimony of Italian observers to determine Bessarion's age. By critically examining the validity of these two assumptions, I reprioritize the evidence, approximating the cardinal's year of birth as 1403.

Adresse: Dr. Scott Kennedy, Bilkent University, Main Campus, G Building, 224/g, 06800 Bilkent–Ankara, TURKEY; kennedy.747@buckeyemail.osu.edu

Striding the boundary between East and West, Greek and Latin, the cardinal Bessarion (d. 1472) was a major figure in the transmission of Greek learning to the Latin West.¹ Born in Trebizond (mod. Trabzon) on the Black Sea coast, Bessarion

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¹ There is no full biography of Bessarion in English. For a brief summary of his life, see A.M. TALBOT, Bessarion. *ODB* 1, 285. The standard scholarly biographies are L. MOHLER, Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist und Staatsmann. Paderborn 1923, vol. 1; L. LABOWSKY, Bessarione. *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 9 (1967) 686–696. For his life up to 1458, E. MIONI, Vita del cardinale Bessarione. *Miscellanea Marciana* 6 (1991) 11–215, is superior. There is also a recent biography by G.L. COLUCCIA, Basilio Bessarione: lo spirito greco e l'Occidente. Florence 2009. For a brief outline of his life, M. ZORZI, Cenni sulla vita e la figura del cardinale Bessarione, in A. Cuna / A. Gatti / S. Ricci (eds.), Bessarione e l'Umanesimo: catalogo della mostra. Venice 1994, 1–19.

played a key role at the council of Ferrara-Florence in 1438–1439 as a spokesperson for the Eastern Orthodox delegation. After the union of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches was ratified, Bessarion joined the Catholic Church as a cardinal, and almost became pope in 1455. Bessarion was a key figure in the Italian Renaissance. His library of rare Greek manuscripts, studiously acquired after the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453, now forms the core of the Greek holdings of the Bibliotheca Marciana. During the 1460s, Bessarion was also engaged in what modern scholars have deemed one of the great literary debates of the century with George of Trebizond over whether Plato or Aristotle's philosophy better conformed to Christian belief. The fruit of this dispute was Bessarion's famous *Refutation of Blasphemies against Plato (In Calumniatorem Platonis)*, which opened the door to the study of Plato in the West.² As one of the first books ever printed on the printing press, the *Refutation* profited from the power of this new technology to sway public opinion.³

As a central player in the Renaissance, Bessarion has naturally inspired a large amount of scholarly interest. Nevertheless, some issues still remain open in his biography. The cardinal's date of birth has been the subject of considerable scholarly discussion over the last century, with dates postulated that range from 1400 to 1408. Opinion has varied and a wide variety of evidence has been marshalled in support of each proposal, but no consensus has emerged. This study will critically reexamine previous arguments for the cardinal's date of birth through a rigorous analysis of the source material. In the first section of this paper, I will review the debate up to this point, outlining the major evidence and arguments on which they base their claims. In the following sections, I will then test the strength of these theses against other contemporary data. It will be shown that the two most commonly accepted dates for Bessarion's birth (1400 and 1408) are built on shaky foundations. By reprioritizing the existing evidence, this paper will suggest a better approximation of Bessarion's date of birth, namely 1403.

1. History of the question

Since the nineteenth century, scholars have put forward three major hypotheses regarding Bessarion's date of birth. The oldest and now generally least accepted

2 L. MOHLER, *Kardinal Bessarion*, vol. 2. Paderborn 1926. For the debate in general, J. HANKINS, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*. Leiden 1990.

3 ZORZI, Cenni (as footnote 1 above) 15.

position derives from a Latin obit at the end of Niccolò Capranica's eulogy of Bessarion that states, "Vixit Nicenus annis 69, mensibus 10, diebus 16." Based on this calculation, Bessarion's late-nineteenth-century biographer Henri Vast neatly calculated Bessarion's date of birth as January 2, 1403, given that Bessarion died on November 18, 1472.⁴ The tidiness of this date has a certain appeal about it, and it is what one finds in some of the more readily accessible reference works, such as volume 1 of Ludwig Mohler's seminal *Kardinal Bessarion* (1923) and Lotte Labowsky's entry in the *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* (1967).

But as the twentieth century wore on, scholars pushed back against this date. The now most commonly accepted position derives from an idea first advanced by Pierre Ioannou and then independently developed by Henri Saffrey in an influential article on the autograph manuscripts of Bessarion.⁵ It runs like this. Canon 14 of the Quinisext Council in Trullo (691–692 A.D.) forbade men from being ordained deacons or priests until they had reached the ages of 25 and 30, respectively, under pain of being removed from office.⁶ Saffrey believed that twelfth-century Byzantine commentaries on canon law by Alexios Aristenos, John Zonaras, and Theodore Balsamon indicated that the Byzantines strictly enforced and respected the canon in the fifteenth century. They would not have unlawfully ordained the future cardinal. Since Bessarion himself, in his *curriculum vitae* scribbled into Venice, Marc. Zan. gr. 14 (= Marcianus 395), tells us the dates at which he obtained the deaconship and priesthood (December 1425 and October 1430, respectively), then his date of birth must fall in 1399/1400.⁷ This date has enjoyed wide acceptance and is even included in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*'s entry on Bessarion.⁸

In 1992, John Monfasani assembled and reviewed the vast body of data that Bessarion and his contemporaries provided about his age in order to arrive at a new approximation.⁹ Although previous scholarship had doubted the authentic-

4 H. VAST, *Le Cardinal Bessarion*. Paris 1878, 2.

5 P. IOANNOU, Un opusculé inédit du cardinal Bessarion: le panégyrique de Saint Bessarion anachorète égyptien. *Analecta Bollandiana* 45 (1947) 107 note 1; H. SAFFREY, Recherches sur quelques autographes du Cardinal Bessarion, in: *Mélanges Eugène Tisserant*. Vatican City 1964, 273–275.

6 Ed. H. OHME, Concilium Constantinopolitanum a. 691/2 in Trullo habitum. *ACC*, 2/4. Berlin 2013, 31.

7 The Greek text is published in SAFFREY, Recherches (as footnote 5 above) 270–271; see also P. SCHREINER, Die byzantinischen Kleinchroniken I. *CFHB*, 12/1. Vienna 1975, 658–660.

8 TALBOT, Bessarion (as footnote 1 above) 285.

9 J. MONFASANI, Platina, Capranica, and Perotti: Bessarion's Latin eulogists and his date of birth, in M. Cortesi / E.V. Maltese (eds.), *Bartolomeo Sacchi Il Platina* (Piacenza 1421–Roma 1481): Atti del Convegno internazionale (Trento, 22–23 ottobre 1990). Naples 1992, 97–136.

ity of Capranica's obit of Bessarion, Monfasani proved that Bessarion's eulogist Capranica or a near contemporary authored the obit. However, he doubted that Capranica actually knew how old Bessarion was when he died. Responding to the Ioannou/Saffrey hypothesis, he argued that the canonical age-requirement would have been followed only in an ideal society and not the real world of late Byzantium, though he does not offer any evidence to support this position.¹⁰ Instead, he builds his case upon the evidence of Bessarion's contemporaries. For example, Bessarion's friend and Latin ghostwriter Niccolò Perotti states, in the preface to his translation of Bessarion's funeral oration for Manuel II Palaiologos (1391–1425), that Bessarion was not yet twenty (*nondum vigesimum aetatis suae annum ingressus*) when he wrote this piece.¹¹ As Perotti was the author of a large two-volume biography of Bessarion, now lost, this data clearly should not have been neglected in favor of the Ioannou/Saffrey hypothesis. Under their hypothesis, Bessarion would have been approximately twenty-five when he wrote Manuel's funeral oration in 1425. The editor of Perotti's preface, Giovanni Mercati, had already noted this problem and suggested that Bessarion's date of birth probably fell around 1406.¹² But Monfasani went further than Mercati. Using the testimony of Ambrogio Traversari, who tells us that Bessarion was thirty (*tricenarius*) when Traversari made his acquaintance at the Council of Ferrara-Flornce in 1438, Monfasani concludes that Bessarion must have been born around 1408, obtaining the deaconship and priesthood at the age of 17 and 22, respectively. He believed that scholars had long underestimated the youthful precociousness of the cardinal.¹³ For Monfasani, Bessarion was a veritable child prodigy who had written mature works and obtained high honors as an adolescent, delivering, for example, Manuel's eulogy at the tender age of 17.¹⁴

Monfasani's hypothesis has subsequently enjoyed mixed approval. In recent years, based on the testimony of the chronicler Andrea Stanziali/Vidali di Schivenoglia that Bessarion was fifty at the council of Mantua in 1458, Thierry Ganchou has added his voice in support of Monfasani's position.¹⁵ Similarly, Tommaso Bracchini has found that this date is corroborated by information provided by

10 MONFASANI, Platina (as footnote 9 above) 115–116.

11 G. MERCATI, *Per la chronologia della vita e degli scritti di Niccolò Perotti archievescovo di Siponto*. Rome 1925, 154.

12 *Ibid.*, 73.

13 *Ibid.*, 116–117.

14 *Ibid.*, 119.

15 TH. GANCHOU, *Les ultimae voluntates de Manuel et Iôannès Chrysolôras et le séjour de Francesco Filelfo à Constantinople*. *Bizantinistica* 7 (2005) 256 note 204.

the sixteenth-century genealogist Orsini, whose testimony, he tentatively suggests, ultimately derived from Perotti's biography of Bessarion.¹⁶

However, Monfasini's thesis has met with resistance. In his unfinished critical biography of the cardinal, Elpidio Mioni strongly argued for a return to 1400.¹⁷ According to Mioni, Perotti exaggerates Bessarion's youth when he wrote his eulogy of Manuel II Palaiologos. Similarly, Traversari's assertion that Bessarion was a *tricenarius* at the time of the council can only mean that he was in his 30's. Then there is the testimony of Bessarion's panegyrists Bartholomeo Sacchi (Il Platina) and Niccolò Capranica that Bessarion had just left boyhood (*ubi primum a pueris excessit*) when he left Trebizond for Constantinople in 1416/7.¹⁸ Thus, if Monfasini is correct, Bessarion could only have been about seven or eight at the time – hardly a teenager.¹⁹ Mioni therefore falls back on the Ioannou-Saffrey thesis, believing that canon law would have been strictly followed.

Thus, there are currently two prevailing positions regarding Bessarion's date of birth, which place it in either 1400 or 1408. One recent study of Bessarion's early years rehashes both positions without taking a definitive stance.²⁰ The time is ripe for a skeptical reexamination of the question and, more broadly, an inquiry into age in Byzantium. Did the Byzantines faithfully follow canonical age requirements? Are fifteenth century age estimates accurate? At what age did Byzantines allow young and prodigious intellectuals such as Bessarion to climb the secular and ecclesiastical *cursus honorum*?

2. Bessarion's date of birth and canon law

Let us reexamine the Ioannou/Saffrey thesis and the issue of canon law, to which some scholars have faithfully clung. They are not alone in this regard, as the canonical age requirement has been widely used to give a minimum date of birth for

16 T. BRACCHINI, Bessarione Comneno? La tradizione indiretta di una misconosciuta opera storica di Giano Lascaris come fonte biografico-genealogica. *Quaderni di Storia* 64 (2006) 87, 101 – 102.

17 MIONI, Vita (as footnote 1 above) 20 – 21.

18 Platina, Panegyricus, edited in *PG* 161 col. CV; Capranica, Funeral Oration, 406. Edited in MOHLER, Kardinal Bessarion, vol. 3. 406.

19 MIONI, Vita (as footnote 1 above) 21.

20 B. TAMBRUN KRASKER, Bessarion de Trébizonde à Mistra: un parcours intellectuel, in C. Märtl / Ch. Kaiser / Th. Ricklin (eds.) "Inter graecos latinissimus, inter latinos graecissimus": Bessarion zwischen den Kulturen. *Pluralisierung & Autorität*, 39. Berlin 2013, 7 – 9.

Byzantine intellectuals, such as, for example, the tenth-century historian Leo the Deacon.²¹ But for all the weight scholarship has given to the legal age-requirement of canon law, it is only quite recently that scholars have begun to question how faithfully the Byzantines clung to it. In a recent chapter on the youthful ordination of Greek patriarchs and Latin popes between the ninth and eleventh centuries, Evangelos Chrysos has demonstrated that a mix of practical needs and political pressures caused the Byzantines to disregard canon law age requirements for deacons, priests, and the patriarch himself.²²

Perhaps, the most egregious examples of these child ordinations took place under Leo VI (886–912) and Romanos Lakapenos (920–944). Even though the emperor Basil I (867–886) and Leo recodified the Justinianic Code with their *Basilika* and made canon 14 imperial law,²³ Leo flagrantly violated the canon shortly after coming to the throne in 886. He forced the patriarch Photios I (877–886) to resign and replaced him with his brother Stephen I (886–893), who was just nineteen, in a grab for control of the Church.²⁴ In the tenth century, a number of youthful patriarchs obtained high office in spite of canon 14. Besides Stephen I, the patriarchs Tryphon (928–931) and Theophylaktos Lekapenos (b. c. 914, r. 933–956) were ordained at young ages. The patriarch Tryphon had been 12 and 15 when he obtained the deaconship and priesthood, respectively. Theophylaktos, the son of the emperor Romanos I Lakapenos (920–44), was nineteen when he became patriarch after having attained the deaconship and priesthood at 15 and 18, respectively. Our source for the age of these men is Theodore Daphnopates' letter to the metropolitan of Herakleia in 931–932.²⁵ In this letter, Daphnopates attempted to convince the metropolitan to drop his objections to Theophylaktos becoming patriarch at such a young age, citing Stephen and Tryphon as precedents. As the son of the emperor, Theophylaktos was essentially meant to be a puppet patriarch, strengthening the emperor's hold over

21 N. PANAGIOTAKES, *Λέων ὁ Διάκονος*, Athens 1965, 8–9.

22 E. CHRYSOS, Minors as patriarchs and popes, in A. Beihammer / B. Krönung / C. Ludwig (eds.) *Prosopon Rhomaikon: ergänzende Studien zur Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit. Millennium-Studien*, 68. Boston 2017, 221–239.

23 *Basilika* 3, 1, 25; ed. H.J. SCHELTEMA / N. VAN DER WAL, *Basilicorum libri LX*. Groningen 1955–88.

24 On Theophylaktos's age and elevation, see V. STANKOVIĆ, When was Theophylaktos Lakapenos born? *JÖB* 55 (2005) 59–69; CHRYSOS, Minors (as footnote 22 above) 229–231.

25 Theodore Daphnopates, Letter 2; ed. J. DARROUZÈS / L. G. WESTERINK, Théodore Daphnopatès. Correspondance. Paris 1978. On the controversy, see *ibid.*, 11–14. A. KAZHDAN, Theophylaktos Lekapenos. *ODB* 3, 2068, is mistaken when he says that Theophylaktos was 16 when elevated to the patriarchate. He was probably 19.

both Church and state.²⁶ The metropolitan of Herakleia may have protested, but in the end his objections had no force. Romanos Lakapenos succeeded in having his son made patriarch in February 933, at the age of nineteen. The take-away from this letter is the young ages at which males could become deacons and priests without considerable pushback from the Church even in the ninth and tenth centuries. Churchmen seem to have raised their voices only when the youthful priest was slated to receive the highest priesthood in the land.

After the egregious power grabs of the ninth and tenth centuries, Byzantine emperors generally refrained from appointing youths to the patriarchate in the following centuries. However, youthful ordinations of deacons and priests continued throughout the empire for a variety of reasons. Among Bessarion's contemporaries there are a number of examples of relatively ordinary people who were promoted prematurely, if the bishop was willing. Take for example the *curriculum vitae* reported by a monk named Matthew, who tells us that he was born in August 1431, and promoted to deacon in November 1456, and hieromonk in November 1458 by the metropolitan of Ankara.²⁷ Attaining the priesthood at age twenty-seven, this man was in clear violation of canon law, even if he had obtained the deaconship at the canonical age of twenty-five. Consider also Theodore Agallianos' letter to the bishop of Ephesos dating from after 1467.²⁸ Agallianos accuses the bishop of corrupting the morals of the city and allowing simony to flourish. Giving an example, he attacks the bishop for accepting a bribe from the parents of a youth named Christophoros and making him a priest even though he was not yet twenty years old.²⁹ Incidentally, the canonical age requirement was a touchy subject for Agallianos himself. When Agallianos was accused of violating numerous canons and laws, his accusers tacked on a charge of violating canon 14. Agallianos personally assures us that his ordinations were in accordance with the canon in his preserved response to their accusations.³⁰

However, we can even find instances where clerics and monks idealized non-canonical ordinations. In the early thirteenth century, the monk Akakios of the Mar Saba monastery in the Judean desert wrote a life of the semi-mythical

²⁶ On his place in Romanos' government, S. RUNCIMAN, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus and his reign: a study of tenth-century Byzantium*. Cambridge 1929, 76–77.

²⁷ J. DARROUZÈS, *Notes d'Asie Mineure*. *Archeion Pontou* 26 (1964) 38–39.

²⁸ C.G. PATRINELES, 'Ο Θεόδωρος Ἀγαλλιανός ταυτιζόμενος πρὸς τὸν Θεοφάνην Μηδείας καὶ οἱ ἀνέκδοτοι λόγοι του. Athens 1960, 54–55.

²⁹ Theodore Agallianos, Letter 6, ed. S. Lampros, 'Επ' ἀνέκδοσις ἐπιστολῶν τοῦ μητροπολίτου Μηδείας Θεοφάνους. *NE* 10 (1913), 269–270.

³⁰ Theodore Agallianos, On his conduct or rather against his accusers, 95–96, 104; ed. PATRINELES, Θεόδωρος (as footnote 28 above).

founders of the Trapezuntine Soumela monastery, Barnabas and Sophronios, at the behest of some Soumelan monks. As the monks did not know anything about the founders, Akakios invented a life of the founders (né Basileios and Soterichos, respectively), alleging that Basileios/Barnabas became metropolitan of Athens at the canonical age of 30, while Soterichos/Sophronios “piously illuminated by the divine” became deacon at 18.³¹ The canonical age requirement for the metropolitan mattered, but a pious youth could easily be raised to the deaconship.

Although heavily fictional, the evidence of this life, when taken together with harder evidence, shows the flexibility of canonical age requirements in the later Byzantine era. Canon 14 clearly mattered to people, but its enforcement was not necessarily absolute. Although removal from office was the specified remedy for transgressors, there is no evidence in the historical record that anyone was ever punished for violating the canonical age requirement.³² One suspects that the Church usually had more pressing issues with which to deal. In general, the canonical age requirement seems to have elicited rage from the clergy either when a person was elevated too far too soon, such as the patriarchs Stephen and Theophylaktos, or as a subsidiary charge to pad more serious accusations, such as we find in the case of Agallianos and his accusers.

Undoubtedly, the issue could be contentious for some clergymen, but if one had a reputation for piety or a powerful patron such as an emperor or bishop, such obstacles could easily be surmounted. Bessarion became a monk at a very early age and was surrounded by such powerful individuals from a young age. He enjoyed the patronage of the former metropolitan of Trebizond (later the metropolitan of Monemvasia), Dositheos. Then there was the emperor John VIII Palaiologos, under whose government Bessarion received high honors at a young age, such as delivering a funeral oration for John’s father Manuel Palaiologos and serving as a spokesperson for the Byzantine delegation to Trebizond, where he delivered a speech before the local emperor, Alexios IV (1417–1429).³³ Eventually, through John’s intervention Bessarion would even become bishop of

31 Akakios Sabbaites, *Life of Saints Barnabas and Sophronios*, 70; ed. P.S. MARINES, *Οἱ ἅγιοι Βαρνάβας καὶ Σωφρόνιος, οἱ κτίτορες τῆς μονῆς Σουμελά*. Patras 2012. On the date and composition of the life, see A.M. TALBOT, A unique saint’s life of the early 13th c.: Akakios Sabbaites’ Vita of Saints Barnabas and Sophronios, in A. Ödekan / E. Akyürek / N. Necipoğlu (eds.), *Change in the Byzantine world in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries*. Istanbul 2010, 57–62.

32 As pointed out by CHRYSOS, *Minors* (as footnote 22 above) 223.

33 On these events, see section 4 below.

Nikaia and spokesperson for the Byzantine delegation at Florence.³⁴ Looking back on his rise in his *Encyclical Letter to the Greeks* of 1463, Bessarion certainly recalled that imperial favor was the reason that he obtained, “offices and positions of authority well beyond my age not because of my virtue but rather their (i.e., the emperors) own goodness.”³⁵ Thus, it is entirely possible that Bessarion could have been ordained early with these two backers in his corner, if they had wanted to fast-track his career.

As such, the Ioannou/Saffrey thesis on Bessarion's date of birth should be rejected. If a largely unknown individual such as the hieromonk Matthew could bypass canon law, surely Bessarion could ascend the Church hierarchy at a young age. He had powerful connections, and it would have been difficult for potential accusers to verify his age, as he came from Trebizond, at the very limits of the Byzantine world.

3. The Monfasani thesis

Next let us turn to the evidence accumulated in favor of the Monfasani thesis. For the casual observer, the round numbers of Bessarion's age given by Ambrogio Traversari (30) and Vidali di Schivenoglia (50) should immediately raise suspicions. The numbers are tidy, which may indicate that these Italian observers did not know Bessarion's exact age but tried to estimate it, rounding up or down. Nevertheless, Monfasani is emphatic that when Traversari says Bessarion was a *tricenarius*, this could only mean thirty and not that Bessarion was in his thirties. Therefore, let us test the reliability of these Italian observers.

Vidali di Schivenoglia's chronicle will serve as a test case. Schivenoglia describes individually the cardinals and Pope present at the council of Mantua in 1458. A typical entry (in this case on Bessarion) runs, “Lo gardenalle Nizeno era anny 50 e si era grego, barbazuto... (The cardinal of Nicaea was 50 years old. He was Greek and had a beard).”³⁶ As Schivenoglia provides the age of all the car-

³⁴ Sylvester Syropoulos, History 3, 23, ed. V. LAURENT, Les “Mémoires” du Grand Ecclésiarche de l’Église de Constantinople Sylvestre Syropoulos sur le concile de Florence (1438–1439). Paris 1971.

³⁵ Bessarion, *Encyclical Letter*, PG 161 col. 461C–D. For further discussion of this important passage, see section 4 below.

³⁶ Excerpts from Schivenoglia's unpublished chronicle are published throughout R. Signorini, *Alloggi di sedici cardinali presenti alla dieta in A. Calzona / F. P. Fiore / A. Tenenti / C. Vasoli* (ed.,) *Il Sogno di Pio II e il viaggio di Roma a Mantova: atti del convegno internazionale*, Mantova, 13–15 aprile 2000. Florence 2003, 328–48.

dinals and the Pope present at the council, several of whom came from well-known families, became Pope, or were well-known intellectuals, we can test the accuracy of his information against that of other, more reliable sources. In the table below, I synthesize this information. The second column gives Schivenoglia's approximation of each individual's age; the third what we know about their date of birth; the fourth their actual age at the council; and the fifth the difference between Schivenoglia's estimate and the person's actual age.

Name	Age per Schivenoglia	Actual DOB	Actual Age at Council	Difference
1. Pope Pius II	60	10/18/05 ³⁷	53	+7
2. Cardinal Guillaume d'Estouteville	60	c. 1402–12. ³⁸	Unknown	Unknown
3. Cardinal Latino Orsini	58	c. 1416 ³⁹	42	+16
4. Cardinal Isidore of Kiev	70	c. 1380–90 ⁴⁰	Unknown	Unknown
5. Cardinal Pietro Barbo (later Pope Paul II r. 1464–1471)	50	2/23/17 ⁴¹	41	+9
6. Cardinal Alain de Coëtivy	58	11/8/1407. ⁴²	51	+7
7. Cardinal Giacomo Tebaldi	50	Unknown ⁴³	Unknown	Unknown

37 Enea Silvio Piccolomini, *Commentaries* 1, 2, ed. A. VAN HECK, Pii II Commetarii rerum memorabilium que temporibus suis contigerunt, vol. 1. Città del Vaticano 1984.

38 M.J. GILL, Death and the cardinal: The two bodies of Guillaume d'Estouteville, *Renaissance Quarterly* 54 (2001) 347–388.

39 S. CORRADINI, Note sul cardinale Latino Orsini fondatore di S. Salvatore in Lauro, in ed. F. Benzi, Sisto IV. Le arti a Roma nel primo Rinascimento. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi. Palazzo della Cancelleria Apostolica – ex Convento di S. Salvatore in Lauro. Roma, 23–25 ottobre 1997. Rome 2000, 126.

40 PLP 8300. See also D. ZIEGLER, Isidore de Kiev, apôtre de l'Union florentine. *Union des Eglises* 13 (1936), 395; P. SCHREINER, Ein byzantinischer Gelehrter zwischen Ost und West. Zur Biographie des Isidor von Kiev und seinem Besuch in Lviv (1436). *BollGrott* 3 (2006) 216.

41 Michael Canensius, *Life of Paul II*, ed. G. ZIPPEL, Le vite di Paolo II di Gaspare da Verona e Michele Canensi. Città di Castello 1904, 76.

42 On the life of Alain de Coëtivy, see R. HARROUET, Une famille de bibliophiles au XV^e siècle: les Coëtivys. *Bulletin et mémoire de la société archéologique du département d'Ille-et-Villaine* 102 (1999), 160–166.

43 On Tebaldi, see A. M. CORBO, Il testamento del cardinale Giacomo Tebaldi. *Commentari: rivista di critica e storia dell'arte* 24 (1974) 241–243; G. MORONI, Dizionario di erudizione storico-ecclesiastica da s. Pietro sino ai nostri giorni. Venice 1850, 250.

8. Vice Chancellor Rodrigo de Borja (later Pope Alexander VI r. 1492–1503)	25	1/1/1431 ⁴⁴	27	-2
9. Cardinal Juan de Mella	60	1397 ⁴⁵	61	-1
10. Cardinal Filippo Calandrini	50	1403 ⁴⁶	55	-5
11. Cardinal Prospero Colonna	68	c. 1400–10 ⁴⁷	Unknown	Unknown
12. Patriarch Ludovico Trevisan	60	1401 ⁴⁸	57	+3
13. Cardinal Jean Rolin	60	1408 ⁴⁹	50	+10
14. Cardinal Luis Juan de Milà y de Borja	38	1432 ⁵⁰	26	+12
15. Cardinal Bessarion	50	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
16. Cardinal Juan de Torquemada	60	1388 ⁵¹	70	-10
17. Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa	54	1401 ⁵²	57	-3

44 G.B. PICOTTI / M. SANFILIPPO, Alessandro VI, in M. Bray (ed.), *Enciclopedia dei Papi*. Rome 2000. Online at [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/alessandro-vi_\(Enciclopedia-dei-Papi\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/alessandro-vi_(Enciclopedia-dei-Papi)/).

45 His tombstone inscription and age at death are recorded in V. FORCELLA, *Iscrizioni delle chiese e d'altri edifici di Roma*, 3. Rome 1873, 212, no. 498.

46 C. GENNARO, Calandrini, Filippo. *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 16. Rome 1973, 450–452.

47 F. PETRUCHI, Prospero Colonna. *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* 27. Rome 1982. Available online at: [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/prospiero-colonna_res-0a9a221b-87eb-11dc-8e9d-0016357eee51_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/prospiero-colonna_res-0a9a221b-87eb-11dc-8e9d-0016357eee51_(Dizionario-Biografico)/)

48 P. PASCHINI, Ludovico Cardinal Camerlengo († 1465). Rome 1939, 7.

49 The life of Jean Rolin lacks a critical biographical study. Most sources on his life date back to the nineteenth century. C. BIGARNE's *Étude historique sur le chancelier Rolin et sa famille*. Dijon 1850, 29, gives 1408 for his date of birth, but he does not cite any source for the year. Bibliography on Rolin's life is helpfully assembled by F. JOUBERT, *Tel un prince dans son diocèse, Jean Rolin, cardinal évêque d'Autun*, in F. Joubert (ed.), *L'artiste et le clerc: commandes artistiques des grands ecclésiastiques à la fin du moyen âge (XIV^e à XVI^e siècle)*. Paris 2006, 106 note 8.

50 The date given for del Mila's birth is 1408, but his life lacks a critical study. On him, J. GOÑI, Juan Luis del Mila, in Q.A. Vaquero / T.M. Martínez / J.V. Gatell (eds.), *Diccionario de historia eclesiástica de España. Suplemento*. Madrid 1987, 489–92; P.L. LLORENS Y RAGA, *Episcopologio de la diócesis de Segorbe-Castellón*, 1. Madrid 1973, 228–232.

51 S. LEDERER, *Der spanische Cardinal Johann von Torquemada: sein Leben und seine Schriften*. Freiburg 1879, 14 note 4. The text of his tombstone is given in V. FORCELLA, *Iscrizioni delle chiese e d'altri edifici di Roma*, 1. Rome 1873, 149, no. 1598.

52 The evidence for 1401 is assembled by E. MEUTHEN, *Acta Cusana: Quellen zur Lebensgeschichte des Nikolaus von Kues*. Hamburg 1976, 1.

From the table above, it should be clear that Schivenoglia's age estimates tend to be round numbers or ages ending in 4 or 8. This in itself should make the scholar suspicious that Schivenoglia only had an approximate idea of the age of the cardinals at the council. When we compare his estimates with the actual ages of these men based on their own testimony, tombstones, or dates deduced by modern scholarship, it should be clear that Schivenoglia had inaccurate information about how old these men were. None of his estimates is correct. They tend to deviate from the age established by modern scholarship by 5–10 years, or an average of ± 7.08 years. One might argue that using the dates assigned by modern scholarship is problematic because modern estimates of these men's date of birth are not always established on the testimony of the author themselves or their gravestone. There are only four individuals for whom we possess such information (Pope Pius II, Juan de Torquemada, Nicholas of Cusa, Juan de Mella). But even in the case of authors who tell us the exact day that they were born, such as Pope Pius II, Schivenoglia overestimates Pius' age by 7 years, saying that the Pope was sixty when he was in fact fifty-three. Given Schivenoglia's inaccuracy, we should not give this chronicle any value as a source for *precisely* dating Bessarion's age. It hits the target but not the bullseye, which is what we are looking for here.

Schivenoglia's round figures undermine the Monfasani thesis. When one encounters a round number on its own, it is tempting to trust it, but there is a real danger in putting faith in it. Italians who wrote about Bessarion often seem to have estimated his age rather than actually knowing it. It is tempting to trust Traversari's estimate that Bessarion was thirty at Ferrara-Florence, but this number is probably quite flexible, give or take 5–10 years. Consider the testimony of Bessarion's colleague, the cardinal Jacopo Ammannati. In his diary, he says that Bessarion was now sixty (*iam sexagenarius*) when he departed on his final mission as papal envoy to the king of France in 1472.⁵³ If Monfasani is correct, Bessarion would have actually been 64. How can we trust Traversari over Ammannati when both men were only acquaintances of Bessarion? Thus, we need to be suspicious of age estimates that are whole numbers. They could easily be off by one to ten years, especially if an observer's estimate of the cardinal's age was based on his appearance. Bessarion could have looked younger than he actually was and thereby fooled observers.

⁵³ Ed. E. CARUSI, *Il diario romano di Jacopo Gherardi da Volterra da VII settembre MCCCCLXIX al XII agosto MCCCCLXXXIV*. Città del Castello 1904, 143.

4. Toward a new date

From a review of the Ioannou/Saffrey and Monfasani theses, we can see that the evidence used to support a date of 1400 or 1408 is problematic. Scholars have optimistically put too much weight on the canonical age-requirement of the Orthodox Church as a dating criterion, expecting Byzantines to have strictly followed the canon, or they have put too much faith in the age estimates of Italian observers, which provide only rough estimates of when a figure was born. Thus, the two prevailing theses on Bessarion's exact date of birth are no longer tenable. It is time to take a fresh look at the evidence and reprioritize it in order to arrive at a more satisfactory answer.

The most valuable piece of evidence that we possess is Bessarion's own testimony in his *Encyclical Letter to the Greeks* from 1463:

Γνώριμον ἦν τοῦμὸν ὄνομα πᾶσι τοῖς ὀπηδήποτε φωνῆς ἐλληνικῆς ἐπαῖουσι· καὶ μήπω τέτταρα καὶ εἴκοσιν ἔτη γένομενος, αἰδοῖος ἡγεμόσι καὶ ἄρχουσι καὶ πᾶσιν ὑμῖν ὑπῆρχον, ποθεινότατος βασιλεῦσιν, οἱ οὐ τῶν ἡλικιωτῶν μόνον καὶ τῶν προβεβηκότων, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν ἀξιώματα περιβεβλημένων ἡμᾶς προετίθουν, καὶ ἀξιώμασί τε καὶ ἀρχαῖς ταῖς ὑπὲρ τὴν ἡλικίαν, οὐ δι' ἐμὴν ἀρετὴν, ἀλλὰ δι' ἰδίαν καλοκάγαθίαν ἐκόσμου.

My name was known to everyone whosoever spoke Greek. Even though I was not yet twenty-four years old, I was revered by sovereigns, rulers, and all of you. I was most beloved to the emperors, who preferred me over not only my peers and superiors, but also those who already held an office. They adorned me with offices and positions of authority well beyond my age not because of my virtue but rather their own goodness.⁵⁴

Although Bessarion is not specific about what moment in his life he is referring to, we know enough about his early life that we can guess. Specifically, he can only be referring to an early burst of political and literary activity that can be dated between 1425 and 1427. Unlike many other contemporary figures, we are fortunate in that Bessarion preserved his youthful writings for posterity in Marcianus 533 (788), so that we have a window on his early life and writings.⁵⁵ The first datable work that he produced was the funeral oration for the emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (1391–1425), who died in July 1425.⁵⁶ Bessarion subsequently served on an embassy to negotiate a marriage alliance between the Palaiologoi and the Grand Komnenoi of Trebizond, sometime between August 1426 and Au-

⁵⁴ Bessarion, *Encyclical Letter* (as footnote 32 above) col. 461CD.

⁵⁵ See SAFFREY, *Recherches* (as footnote 5) for an overview of the manuscript.

⁵⁶ Ed. S. LAMPROS, *Παλαιολόγεια καὶ Πελοποννησιακά*, 3. Athens 1926, 284–290.

gust 1427.⁵⁷ During the embassy to his home city of Trebizond, Bessarion delivered a panegyric praising Trebizond's emperor Alexios IV (1417–1429) and his wife Theodora Kantakouzene.⁵⁸ After the death of Theodora in November 1426, Bessarion wrote three monodies to comfort the distraught emperor.⁵⁹ This was a highly productive time for Bessarion, during which he had the ear of emperors.

After 1427, Bessarion seems to have faded into the background for a time, as he returned to his studies and subsequently moved to the despotate of Morea, where he studied under the philosopher George Gemistos Plethon until roughly 1436. The next datable document in his portfolio are some verses written to honor the death of Cleofe Malatesta, the wife of the despot Theodore II Palaiologos in 1433.⁶⁰ Bessarion is not known to have held any imperial honors during this time. The next great honor he received was the bishopric of Nikaia in 1437. Thus, when Bessarion says he received high honors before he was 24, he is in all likelihood referring to the period of 1425–1427 when he first rose to prominence. This would put his date of birth between the fall of 1402 and the fall of 1404. If the Saffrey/Ioannou dating were correct, Bessarion would have first began accumulating “great honors” in 1423, much too early given the existing facts. Similarly, per the Monfasani thesis, Bessarion would, in his *Encyclical Letter*, be saying that he first became important in 1431, which is much too late.

Our next best evidence comes from Bessarion's panegyrist Platina, who probably interviewed the cardinal to produce his panegyric. Platina reports that Bessarion “had just left boyhood” (*ubi primum a pueris excessit*) when he departed Trebizond with his mentor Dositheos to pursue more advanced studies at Constantinople, in 1416–1417.⁶¹ In Greek culture then just as today, boyhood

57 August 1426 is the terminus post quem for the embassy, as the emperor John VIII's previous wife Sophia of Montferrat fled to the West in this month. For this event, Doukas, *History* 20.6, ed. V. GRECU, *Istoria turco-bizantină* (1341–1462). Bucharest 1958; George Sphrantzes, *Chronicle*, 14.2, ed. R. MAISANO, Giorgio Sfranze: Cronaca. *CFHB*, 29. Rome 1990. August 1427 is the terminus ante quem for the embassy, as John's new bride Maria of Trebizond came to the city then. On which, see Sphrantzes, *Chronicle*, 14.3.

58 Ed. *Chrysanthos*, Βησσαρίωνος προσφώνημα πρὸς τὸν εὐσεβέστατον βασιλέα τῆς Τραπεζοῦντος Ἀλέξιον τὸν Μέγαν Κομνηνόν. *Archeion Pontou* 12 (1946) 117–130.

59 Monodies 2–3 are edited by A. SIDERAS, 25 unedierte byzantinische Grabreden. Thessalonike 1990, 349–359, 363–368. The first monody is edited separately by A. SIDERAS, Die byzantinischen Grabreden. *WBS*, 19. Vienna 1994, 531–536.

60 Ed. S. LAMPROS, *Παλαιολογία* (as footnote 53 above) 176.

61 Platina, *Panegyricus* (as footnote 19 above): *ubi primum a pueris excessit, cura parentum Byzantium transmittitur*. The phrase is repeated almost verbatim by Capranica, *Funeral Oration* (as footnote 19 above) 406. The date for Bessarion's departure from Trebizond is provided by V. LAURENT, *La succession épiscopale de Trébizonde au moyen âge* (additions et corrections). *Archeion Pontou* 21 (1956) 93–94.

ended around the age of fourteen.⁶² If he were born in 1402–1404, Bessarion would have been 12–15 when he left his home city, which tallies well with his own testimony. By comparison, according to the Ioannou/Saffrey thesis he would have been 16–17, while according to the Monfasani thesis he would have been 8–9. Since Bessarion tells us in the prologue to his collected early works that he was born in Trebizond but really raised and educated in Constantinople, his date of birth must be later rather than earlier.⁶³ It is harder to believe that he would have thought that he was raised in Constantinople if he had arrived there as a 16–17 year old.

As I noted above, Capranica's testimony that Bessarion was born on January 2, 1403, has long fallen out of favor. But the time is now ripe to reconsider this evidence. In the past, scholars ignored it because it contradicted the canonical age requirements.⁶⁴ But as this paper has suggested, Bessarion could easily have been ordained at a premature age if powerful people had supported his career, as they most certainly did. A second train of thought has raised suspicions about the obit, specifically a doubt that Capranica wrote it.⁶⁵ But as Monfasani showed long ago, Capranica probably did write it, or at least someone contemporary to Bessarion did.⁶⁶ Monfasani also suggested that Capranica's malice or carelessness may have made him careless in his calculations of Bessarion's life-span. However, this premise is not entirely satisfactory. Capranica's funeral oration of Bessarion may be careless about the details of his life, but he need not have misrepresented Bessarion's age, if one considers Capranica's testimony in light of the other, more reliable evidence on Bessarion's age that we have presented. If we follow Capranica, Bessarion would have been twenty-three between January 1426 and January 1427. As we have seen, this was a highly productive year for the future cardinal and exactly matches his own precise testimony in the *Encyclical Letter*.

In addition, Bessarion's obit – *Vixit Nicenus annis 69, mensibus 10, diebus 16* – bears a resemblance to the language of tombstones from this period. For example, the tombstone of Bessarion's fellow cardinal Juan de Mella reads, *Ioanni de*

⁶² Pseudo-Zonaras, *Lexicon*, letter pi p. 1495: Παῖς. ἀπὸ ἐτῶν ε' ἕως ἐτῶν ιδ'; *ibid.*, letter eta p. 927: "Ἐφηβος. παῖς νέος ἦτοι ἐτῶν ιδ' ἢ ιη'; ed. J. A. H. Tittmann, *Iohannis Zonarae lexicon ex tribus codicibus manuscriptis*, 2 vols. Leipzig 1808.

⁶³ SAFFREY, *Recherches* (as footnote 5 above) 283: τοῦνομα Βησσαρίωνι, τὸ γένος ἐκ Τραπεζοῦντος, ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει τραφέντι καὶ παιδευθέντι.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 272–5.

⁶⁵ MIONI, *Vita* (as footnote 1 above) 18–9. M. DE NICHILLO, *I viri illustres del cod. Vat. lat. 3920*. Rome 1997, 31–6, concurs with Monfasani.

⁶⁶ MONFASANI, *Platina* (as footnote 9 above) 108–115.

Mella...cardinali Zamoren sacrum. Vixit annis 70. Obiit 13 Octobris a salute nostra 1467, pontificis maximi Pauli II anno quarto ("Sacred...to Juan de Mella the cardinal of Zamora. He lived for 70 years. He died on October 13, 1467, year four of Pope Paul II").⁶⁷ Bessarion's original tombstone does not survive, as the Eugenia (now Bessarion) chapel where he was buried in the Basilica di dei Santi XII Apostoli in Rome was damaged by floods, the sack of the city in 1527, and the construction of other chapels. The chapel's current decoration is not original, but was restored in 1683.⁶⁸ Thus, it is entirely possible that Capranica or whoever scribbled this contemporary note obtained this information directly from Bessarion's original tombstone in Rome.

If Capranica's date is correct, it does not contradict the testimonies of Traversari and Schivenoglia. Bessarion would have been 35 and 55, respectively, when these individuals made his acquaintance, falling within the range of error evident from their estimates of 30 and 50. It is significant that when Bessarion departed on his final mission as papal envoy to the king of France in 1472, his fellow cardinal Jacopo Ammannati tells us that Bessarion was sixty (*iam sexagenarius*),⁶⁹ but another contemporary observer reports that the cardinal was seventy at his death later that year on the night of November 17–18, 1472.⁷⁰ If he was born in 1403, Bessarion would have straddled the border of both estimates at the age of 69.

Of course, problems remain for the proposed date 1403. There is still the testimony of Bessarion's friend Niccolò Perotti that Bessarion was not yet twenty years old when he wrote his funeral oration for Manuel Palaiologos. As Perotti tells us that he wrote a long two-volume work on the cardinal's life, it is hard to overlook his information. It would place Bessarion's birthdate between the summer of 1406 and the summer of 1407 at the latest. He would have been just a child of 10–11 when he left Trebizond – hardly a teenager. Similarly, Bessarion's own statement that he was "not yet 24" when he received high honors would place the first high honors that he received in 1429–1430. But from all indications, this was a fairly uneventful period in Bessarion's life, as the future car-

⁶⁷ FORCELLA, *Iscrizioni* (as footnote 45 above) 212, no. 498.

⁶⁸ On Bessarion's funerary inscriptions, see MOHLER, *Kardinal Bessarion* (as footnote 1 above) 1.427–8; VAST, *Le cardinal* (as footnote 4 above) 432 note 1. For the text of the 1683 inscription, see *ibid.*, 461. The text is also printed in FORCELLA, *Iscrizioni delle chiese e d'altri edifici di Roma*, 2. Rome 1873, 270, no. 828.

⁶⁹ Ammannati, *Diary* ed. CARUSI (as footnote 53 above) 143.

⁷⁰ Anonymous, *Bessarione: note biografica. Bessarione* 1 (1896–7) 10.

dinal had returned to his studies.⁷¹ As noted above, Bessarion's collected works do not include any major writings from this period. We know that he became a priest during this period, but one doubts that anyone would have thought of this as a high honor, given his earlier accomplishments in the literary, diplomatic, and political arenas.⁷² Therefore, Perotti's date simply does not fit the biographical information provided by Bessarion himself. Although Perotti should have known when Bessarion was born, Mioni correctly demonstrates that Perotti, prone to numerical exaggeration, underestimated the cardinal's age to make Bessarion seem more impressive.⁷³

In light of all the evidence available on Bessarion's birth, it therefore seems most likely that the cardinal was born on January 2, 1403, or at least sometime between the fall of 1402 and the fall of 1404. The evidence provided by Capranica matches well the data that ultimately derives from Bessarion himself. Admittedly, many Italian observers offer conflicting estimates of Bessarion's age, but scholars should not optimistically trust them as they have in the past. A step forward is a step back.

71 For a detailed outline of this period, TAMBRUN-KRASKER, Bessarion (as footnote 20 above) 11–15.

72 SAFFREY, *Recherches* (as footnote 5 above) 271. Bessarion became a priest in October 1430.

73 MIONI, *Vita* (as footnote 1 above) 21.

