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Introduction

We think we know what Byzantium was—an eastern empire ruled for hundreds of years from the city of Constantinople (Istanbul), the victim, or the duplicitous ally, of the Crusaders, the transmitter of classical culture and classical manuscripts to the west, a people tragic in their final hours before the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453, but already in a state of inexorable decline. Byzantium lies outside the standard western narrative of the formation of Europe. It is consigned to the twin spheres of exoticism and the east, and above all to the realms of ossification and pointless bureaucracy. One looks in vain for civil society in Byzantium, let alone democracy or the hallmarks of western liberalism. In the words of a distinguished Russian medievalist, “Can one imagine a Magna Carta in Byzantium or in Rus? Is it conceivable that a Byzantine emperor or a Russian tsar could view himself, or might be viewed by others, as *primus inter pares*?” The same writer continued, “However, none of this in any way lessens my admiration for scholars who are courageous enough to enter into the mysteries of Byzantine history: perhaps such people manage to overcome their own personal inclinations and sympathies.”¹

A clutch of recent publications by British and American scholars have sought to present a different, less prejudiced, and more positive view, and a series of important exhibitions has demonstrated the powerful appeal that Byzantium exerts on the wider public.² Yet historians of Byzantium still struggle with the weight of a powerfully negative tradition that has also made its way into common English usage. A random cull over the past few months produced allusions to “the byzantine appointments procedure” and “the Byzantine world of sports governance” (in relation to the London Olympics of 2012). Capitalization seems to be optional.

Any interpretation can only be the interpretation of its own day, and this book is inevitably written from the perspective of its author—that is, from within the Anglo-Saxon, and indeed the British, context. Interpretations of Byzantium have been and still are heavily influenced by later cultural and national agendas. The idea (and indeed the ideal) of Byzantium has a powerful salience in the Orthodox world, and has acquired even more potency with the ending of the communist regimes in eastern Europe. In Vladimir Putin’s Russia a television documentary (or pseudo-documentary) with the title “The Destruction of an Empire: The Lesson of Byzantium” caused a sensation when it was shown in 2008. It had received considerable official support and went on to win a best documentary award. Its message, put crudely, was anti-western and nationalistic: Russia’s true identity is as the heir of Byzantium, and it must avoid the fate of Byzantium—namely, destruction by the west.³

Religion is a central issue in relation to Byzantium. Few historians of the west feel confident when faced with the subject of Byzantine Orthodoxy and many prefer to relegate it to a separate sphere; at the same time in the Orthodox world the national Orthodox churches are experiencing both opportunities and problems. There are obvious tensions between the latter feature and the renewed emphasis on an exclusively western narrative of European history that has also been a recent development. The increased salience of the idea of a Christian Europe, or indeed a western world, confronted by radical Islam only adds to the discomfort surrounding Byzantium and the Orthodox sphere.

It does not help in resolving the uncertainty over Byzantium's place in historical writing today that so much of the contemporary written source material is the work of a privileged elite, or that so much Byzantine art is religious in character. Byzantium is not merely medieval but also deeply unfamiliar. Valiant efforts are needed to recapture the world of Byzantine society as a whole, and to reveal and emphasize the secular element that also existed in Byzantium (chapter 4). Reading the contemporary sources against the grain is an essential requirement.

Traditional Byzantine scholarship has flourished in a number of European centers, especially perhaps Paris, Vienna, and Munich, though also elsewhere, as well as in Greece, prerevolutionary Russia, Belgrade, and Sofia. An active group is now based in Sweden. But Byzantine scholarship was slow to gain a foothold in the Anglo-Saxon context, where it is not seen as part of our own history and

needs hard-to-acquire language skills and technical expertise. It has depended in the past, moreover, on the existence of a well-established tradition of classical teaching in schools and universities, and most importantly on the teaching of classical Greek;⁴ to say that this can no longer be relied upon is an understatement.⁵ Furthermore, even today there are classicists who look down on Byzantium. A flood of English-language guides, general books, and translations is helping to change the situation, as are the well-attended annual conferences established since the 1960s: these include the Byzantine Studies Conference in North America and the annual British Byzantine Symposium in addition to the regular international congresses. One of the contributors to a recent handbook is confident enough to refer to “the triumph of Byzantium: Byzantine studies from the 1950s.”⁶ Yet the place of the subject in Anglo-Saxon universities is far from secure; it does not easily fit existing departmental structures, or feature among their priorities, and the few centers in Britain in which Byzantine studies has had an independent existence have all experienced difficulties in recent years.

To date Byzantium has only partly benefited from the enormous expansion that has taken place in the last generation in archaeological work on late antiquity, in comparison with which the archaeology of the Byzantine period proper remains at a relatively early stage. This too is changing rapidly, partly as a result of changing conceptions of the subject among Byzantinists, but also with the growth of diachronic approaches to archaeological sites and geographical areas in Greece and Turkey, which aim to trace their

settlement history from the earliest times to the modern period, the Byzantine period included.

But it is also a matter of defining the period covered by “Byzantium,” and here again, Byzantium as a subject finds itself in a quandary. Should it be seen as beginning with the foundation of Constantinople by Constantine I in 330, or only with the sixth or seventh century, as some Byzantinists currently prefer? French scholarship has been much less likely to see this as a problem, whether in relation to specialized publications or general introductions. This is also true of the economic history of Byzantium, in which French scholars have been prominent.⁷ In Greece, too, Byzantium starts early, and late antiquity is not well established as a period of study; I will return to the reasons for this in chapter 2. Finally, in academic literature on the history and archaeology of Israel, Jordan, and to a lesser extent Egypt, “Byzantine” has traditionally meant something entirely different: the period from (roughly) the reign of Constantine until the Arab conquests of the seventh century. In contrast, an “explosion of late antiquity,” as it has been called,⁸ has taken hold in recent decades in the world of Anglo-Saxon scholarship. Late antiquity is now held by some scholars to embrace the rise of Islam and extend as late as the end of the first millennium, and this expansion threatens to sideline Byzantium once again. Most scholars of late antiquity would not consider themselves as Byzantinists; in contrast, many Byzantinists assume that they have a claim on the early period, even if others prefer their subject to start around the seventh century.

My aim in the chapters that follow is to highlight some of the interesting questions that arise if one tries to understand Byzantium and its society. They do not provide a history, nor do they cover all the facets that need to be addressed. Rather, they concern questions and reflections that have preoccupied me and continue to do so. I am interested throughout in methodological issues, for Byzantium is an undertheorized field as well as an understudied one.

The book consists of five essays on particular themes. I have included references to some of the secondary literature, though obviously these are highly selective, and no doubt also personal. Some of the issues I consider in this book will be familiar to my fellow-Byzantinists, though perhaps less so to others. This is not another general history of Byzantium, of which there are many already, in addition to the excellent guides and handbooks already mentioned.⁹ In particular, it omits many aspects of Byzantine history and culture that would be essential to such a work. Nor is my aim to provide another apologia for Byzantium. Instead, this series of essays is designed to confront some of the issues that arise from the situation I have just outlined, and to address the question of where (if at all) Byzantium stands in relation to current historiographical trends and major historical themes, to which it often stands in a relation of tension. My hope is to explain why that should be so, and how the question can or should be tackled.



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