A Short History of Byzantium

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Published in History Today Volume 64 Issue 3 March 2014
Byzantine Empire Historiography

Liz James celebrates the Eastern Empire's artistic heritage and its pivotal role in shaping Europe and the Islamic world of the Middle Ages.

Virgin and Child with Justinian and Constantine (10th-12th century), Hagia Sophia, Istanbul. Bridgeman/De Agostini Picture Library

'Constantinople is a very hard word; how do you spell it?', the correct answer being, of course, that nobody could be bothered to spell it anyway: Constantinople was simply 'The City' and modern Istanbul reflects that as a corruption of the Greek phrase eis ten polin, 'to The City'.

The scale of responses to Constantinople and Byzantium vary from what my history teacher called 'blank looks all round' to 'an empire steeped in vice and depravity' (Gibbon, declining and falling) to lots of nice pictures with vaguely religious music behind them. It is long ago and far away from the staples of popular history: the Egyptians, the Tudors and the Nazis. And yet ... Byzantium should not be 'other' to Europe; Byzantium shaped Europe.

The history of Byzantium helps us to understand the history of the Balkans from Archduke Ferdinand to Kosovo and Radovan Karadžić; it alerts us to the forming of the Islamic world in the Middle Ages, a shaping that affects events now, not least the presence of Christians in Egypt and Syria; it reminds us of the significance of Orthodoxy in Russia; it takes us from the medieval world to the Renaissance; it underlies some of the ambivalences about Turkey in Europe. Byzantine culture underlies European culture: Maria Vassilaki's The Hand of Angelos (2010) offers an alternative to El Greco in art; J.B. Bullen's Byzantium Rediscovered (2003) and Robert Nelson's Hagia Sophia 1850-1950 (2004) offer modern contexts; John Taverner reminds us of the beauty of Orthodox music. Even now Istanbul's Byzantine heritage sits uneasily in the city, as recent plans to turn the church, now museum, of Hagia Sophia back into a mosque imply, with all the uncertainties this raises for the building as a World Heritage Site.

But Byzantium was long ago and far away. It lasted about 1,300 years from the fourth century AD to 1453 and the sack of Constantinople by the Turks establishing the city as capital of the Ottoman Empire. It was Greek-speaking, self-defined as Roman and profoundly Christian. It is the complexities, the quarrels, the intricacies, the qualities we label as 'byzantine' that actually make the Byzantine Empire fascinating. How could anyone care so much about the use of pictures in religious worship or fret about whether the emperor's second cousin twice removed was a suitable wife for a Frank?
Byzantium is almost impossible to put into a single volume. Averil Cameron’s *The Byzantines* (2010) comes close. Chris Wickham’s *The Inheritance of Rome* (2009) demonstrates that Byzantium was part of the wider history of Europe. The recent trend for accessible, multi-authored handbooks on Byzantium has ranged from the very scholarly survey of the *Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies* (2010) to the more specific *Social History of Byzantium* (2008) and the hugely important *Economic History of Byzantium* (2007). Then there are the more eclectic collections, such as *Advances in Byzantine History* (2005), or *Companion to Byzantium* (2010), or *The Byzantine World* (2012), which deal with everything from eunuchs and slaves to beauty and memory.

Byzantium is still an area where you can be the first person to write on your chosen topic. Most shades of theory and method are reflected and fought over in Byzantine Studies, from positivist formalism to poststructuralism, from reader-response criticism to Marxism, feminism and mysticism.

The redefinition of Byzantine Iconoclasm is a hot topic, the much-discussed seventh- and eighth-century conflict over whether religious images formed a part of religious practice, an argument about art and faith that affected the whole empire and spilled over into the Islamic and western European worlds. It was one of the factors that led Catholic Europe and Orthodox Byzantium to go their separate ways, played out in the Sack of Constantinople in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade and by the Byzantine preference for the turban (of the Turks) not the tiara (of the pope) in 1453 as the armies of Mehmet II came closer to the City. New research (Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon in two hefty tomes and Brubaker’s 2012 summary) suggests that Iconoclasm was not as significant and world-changing as we think; but as their work is assimilated, the debate begins.

In my own area, art history, there has been a spate of exhibitions of Byzantine art. Four of the biggest were *Byzantium 330-1453* in 2011 at the Royal Academy and the Metropolitan Museum, New York trilogy, *Glory of Byzantium, Faith and Power* and *Byzantium and Islam*. All came with catalogues illustrating the glories of Byzantine art (sometimes the same pieces) and with essays on different themes. But for the complexities of Byzantium through its art, Robin Cormack’s book, *Writing in Gold* (1985) remains a significant work. Cormack puts art at the centre of Byzantium, a crucial means of understanding its social and cultural forces: what objects and images can tell us about the Byzantines and how they saw, understood, pictured and constructed their world.

Byzantium is often put into a box labelled ‘religious’ because so much of what survives is religious. It was a society where an ideology beyond one derived from faith, orthodox or heretical was impossible to imagine (to the Byzantines, Islam and Judaism were both heresies). Mary Cunningham’s *Faith in the Byzantine World* (2002) discusses it clearly and concisely. But secular Byzantium existed and alongside the more usual tropes of history — wars, laws and whores — included humour (bad puns, slapstick and farting in particular), sex (the vulgar Veroli Casket in the V&A with its fornicating putti), and drugs (when and why not to eat lettuce — see Symeon Seth’s recommendations): in *Other Icons* (2006), Henry Maguire and Eunice Dautermann Maguire show this alternative Byzantium.

Constantinople is a very hard word because Byzantium is at its most interesting when we are prepared to tackle its complexities. It is baffling and beautiful (see the images in *The
Mosaics of Thessaloniki, 2011), confusing and contradictory (icons or Iconoclasm?), vast and unmanageable (Rome to Moscow via Cairo, Jerusalem and Damascus). It is like chess in three dimensions and it makes a change from another 30 minutes with The Tudors.

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