

## Review

Nesbitt, C., and M. Jackson, eds. *Experiencing Byzantium. Papers from the 44th Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Newcastle and Durham, April 2011*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. 406. ISBN 9781472412294. £85.00

*Experiencing Byzantium* represents the edited papers from the 44<sup>th</sup> Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies (Newcastle and Durham, April 2011). The success of any volume of proceedings lies not just in collecting a series of papers around a theme but also, if possible, enabling readers to experience (if you will) somewhat of the tenor of discussions which the original event evoked. In this, the editors have made a number of commendable choices.

The introduction, outlining the context for the Symposium, generates a tangible sense of this collection of papers as events rather than simply texts. Some concluding remarks about debates, which emerged from or at the Symposium, rather than only those that informed its choice of theme, would also have been appreciated. The arrangement of the book into sections also preserves the feel of the original conference panels. Finally, the decision by the editors to allow and perhaps encourage a wide variety of written styles, with some unusual moments of informality and discursive conjecture, gives this volume the feel of a symposium and some of its more startling and valuable insights.

The opening section, 'Experiencing Art' begins with an examination by Liz James of Projecta's Casket, a Late Antique silver object now held by the British Museum, traditionally viewed in terms of the images depicted upon it and their style. By focusing on the 'thingness' of the object, for example its awkward shape and bulk, James is able to reflect on the difference between depicted and experienced reality. These insights are subsequently expanded to consider icons as 'things' and the role of object biography.

Warren T. Woodfin's chapter also addresses replication, drawing together a diverse range of evidence for the depiction of imperial and holy figures on textiles. He demonstrates a general shift away from serialization of religious images post-843 AD. With respect to images of the emperor, Woodfin's argument turns on the significance of imperial portraits appearing on cloth which was itself difficult to produce and highly sought-after serving to universalize the imperial dignity and power.

The section 'Experiencing Faith' contains three papers, all in some capacity related to the church as space. Béatrice Caseau on the experience of the sacred, and especially the

importance of touch and taste, draws together evidence on the use of curtains in church interiors and explores the increasingly circumscribed role of touch in the Eucharist, as celebrants moved from holding the Eucharistic bread to receiving it in their mouths. Ritual kissing becomes another focus for this exploration, again demonstrating the increasingly hierarchical use of touch in liturgical contexts.

The next chapter by Andrew Louth concerns ‘frames of reference’ within which Byzantine worshippers may have experienced liturgy. Louth’s repeated emphasis on the fact that things might be done regularly without believers knowing why (p. 83) alludes to the possible distinction between personal experience and personal knowledge, which could perhaps have been unpacked more. It is, however, subsidiary to his main conclusion, that liturgy must be understood in three temporal and spatial contexts: in real time and space, in the extra-temporal and extra-spatial realm of the heavenly and also in the historical framework of space and time which Jerusalem had provided for the Incarnation.

Finally, Nikolaos Karydis’ interpretation of the Church of St John in Ephesus develops his own work to reconstruct the church. Karydis examines the architectural accuracy of descriptions by Procopius and Ibn Battuta and outlines various phases of construction. Especially in the analysis of the archaeological evidence, Karydis might have glossed various architectural terms but his subsequent discussion of the literary aims and circumstances of composition of the two texts also broadens his discussion into the contrast between ‘recreation’ and ‘description’ in processing the memory of experiencing a building.

‘Experiencing landscape’ includes three papers, all addressing spiritual landscapes, though readings of them are not purely theocentric. Nikolaos Bakirtzis’ paper on ‘Locating Byzantine monasteries’ examines the ways in which monastic foundations near Paphos in Cyprus helped to maintain the persistence and credibility of the Byzantine religious tradition on eleventh- and twelfth-century Cyprus. The second half of the chapter, focusing on northern Greece, examines the role of large rural monasteries in bridging urban and rural space.

Katie Green’s paper on ‘Experiencing Politiko’ also takes Cyprus as its focus and addresses, via Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC), the question of how religious structures and routes were embedded into a wider landscape. The limitations of data are severe and the application of HLC seemed at times to contribute very little and impair reflection on the range of available sources, many of which are extremely late for the Byzantine landscape analysis attempted. Nevertheless, some insight into the ways in which the people of Byzantine Politiko may have perceived their landscape is extracted.

Third, Vicky Manolopoulou's paper separates litanies performed at a moment of trouble, such as an earthquake, and litanies performed (usually annually) to commemorate the event. Manolopoulou demonstrates that such litanies created continuity over time, and a means of dispersing the immediate fear of an event into a regular reflection on God's mercy and protection. In the case of Constantinople, Manolopoulou suggests, litanies focused on the Virgin throughout the year traversed, and thereby enacted, the protective role of the Theotokos over her city.

Heather Hunter-Crawley and Sophie V. Moore provide two complementary though very different papers to 'Experiencing Ritual'. Hunter-Crawley addresses the use of the cross of light as a symbol in Byzantium, exploring the use of crosses in silver liturgical vessels, which she argues were left plain to maximize their reflectivity. Cross-shaped windows and lamps with cross-shaped ornamentation are also combined with written evidence to demonstrate that in Byzantine theology, the cross of light not only alluded to, but could stand for Christ himself.

The next paper takes as its starting point the limited but visible evidence for shrouding in Byzantine funerary practice. Without speculating unduly on who may have performed such tasks, Moore pursues the implication that if images show a dead individual fully-clothed subsequently being buried in a shroud, somebody must have stripped, washed and shrouded the body. Moore's explicit reference to the personal in this paper is one of the most effective moments of informality. Moore's interpretation is, she makes clear, underpinned by her own experience of bereavement. The result remains sensitive to the possibly myriad and largely unknown permutations of feeling for a Byzantine actor, but succeeds in suggesting some ways in which the ritual of shrouding may have enabled mourners to navigate the personal, communal and religious ramifications of death.

Iceland opens the scene for the next section, 'Experiencing Self', in which Scott Ashley asks how Icelanders after the twelfth century experienced Byzantium as the setting of stories about ancestral travel. The answer, woven skillfully from a range of written sources and, where possible, material culture, seems to be 'as Iceland, but different'. Ashley's analysis exposes numerous instances in which, while Byzantium was perceived as a distant place to which men had once travelled to gain honor and from which they had sometimes returned in fine clothes, it was understood in squarely Icelandic terms. Where Byzantium is presented as different it is not on the basis of detailed imaginings, but rather a more amorphous sense of foreignness.

Myrto Hatzaki, by contrast, begins with the iconic Byzantine mosaic depiction of Zoe and Constantine Monomachos in the Hagia Sophia. The empress Zoe, in her sixties at the point depicted, appears beautiful and flawless, and so Hatzaki embarks upon a careful examination of the importance of beauty for a Byzantine understanding of imperial office, including the implication in many sources that beauty fitted a person to rule. Returning to the mosaics, however, Hatzaki demonstrates the importance of gender in these constructs, which allowed greater personality to a male ruler than the formulaic beauty expected of an empress.

Middle Byzantine historiography provides the final space for considering the experience of self, which Dion C. Smythe explores in the writings of Michael Psellos, Anna Komnene and Niketas Choniates. Smythe, following Ruth Macrides, makes the point that self plays an inevitable role in the writing of Byzantine historiography because of the importance of the classical model of history writing, with its emphasis on autopsy. Smythe poses but does not fully resolve the question of whether or not these three authors are, by virtue of being such strong personalities, unusually present in their sources or merely the clearest examples of a common phenomenon.

The final section of the book, 'Experiencing stories', features three papers which perhaps fit least well together, though each is effective on its own terms. Margaret Mullet's examination of the Byzantine tent begins by presenting the evidence for the form and function of tents in Byzantium. Beyond their existence, however, tents are discussed as sites of experience both of and in texts. They might be used to establish living and administrative quarters in new places, as in an imperial journey or, when built structures were available, in order to provide greater flexibility or control of space. In both capacities tents served as locations in which texts might be read or produced, but they also provide the means in stories to demonstrate characters exploiting or dominating the space.

Georgia Frank's paper explores the tension in the story of the Ascension between grief over the departure of Christ and rejoicing at his return to the heavenly realm. In this context, psalms are presented as vital for providing contemplative space and interpretative support in conveying believers from one state of mind to the other. Sound and repetition thus become crucial to the experience of faith.

The last paper in this volume, by Alexander Lingas on the changing musical soundscape of Byzantine liturgy, is perhaps the most technical and includes long tabulations comparing different musical forms. This is excellently balanced for historians not tackling Byzantine musicology, however, by a discussion which draws out the general from the technical. In particular, Lingas' argument that the development of complex systems of Byzantine hymnody

consciously mirrored theological developments reflects the broader theme of the connectedness in Byzantine sacred experience of the intellectual and ritual.

One of the most noticeable features of this book, though not thematically addressed, is the desire to use theoretical frameworks for approaching ‘experience’. Indeed, in the introduction the editors suggest being ‘informed by appropriate theoretical frameworks’ as an answer to the question ‘how can individual academics of the twenty-first-century world ever hope to understand the lives of people living in a very different past?’ (p. 9). It is an answer tested but never fully proven (or, at least, the appropriate frameworks have not always been found). In some cases, theoretical approaches, such as that of ‘sensory affordance’ by Heather Hunter-Crawley or ‘Thing Theory’ by Liz James have expanded the ways in which evidence might be approached, but theoretical approaches particularly to the affective or emotive register of past societies have, to this reviewer’s mind, more often gotten in the way of or simply been redundant within analyses of landscape, text and material which appear to have made greater advances simply on the basis of the standard ‘who, what, where, when, why?’ repertoire of questions of the material.

From a final ‘thingness’ perspective, the book is attractively presented. Reproductions of images are of good quality. There are more proofing errors than might be ideal but not enough to hinder reading. Perhaps most problematic is the inconsistency in rendering Greek, which appears in poly- and monotonic format and transliterated in a variety of ways, with and without italicization. None of these minor issues, however, prevents this from being an interesting and important contribution to Byzantine studies and one released sufficiently soon after the event it records hopefully to contribute to live debates.

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